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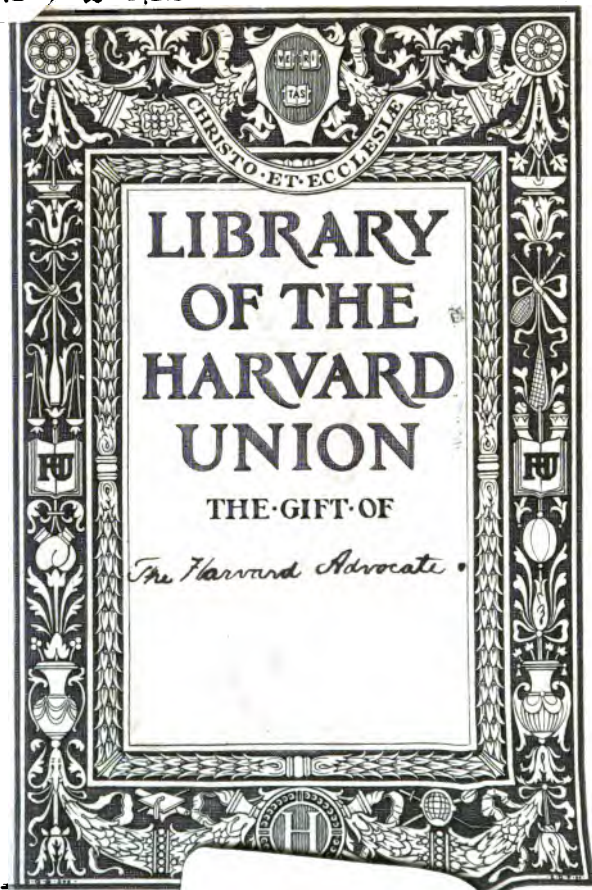
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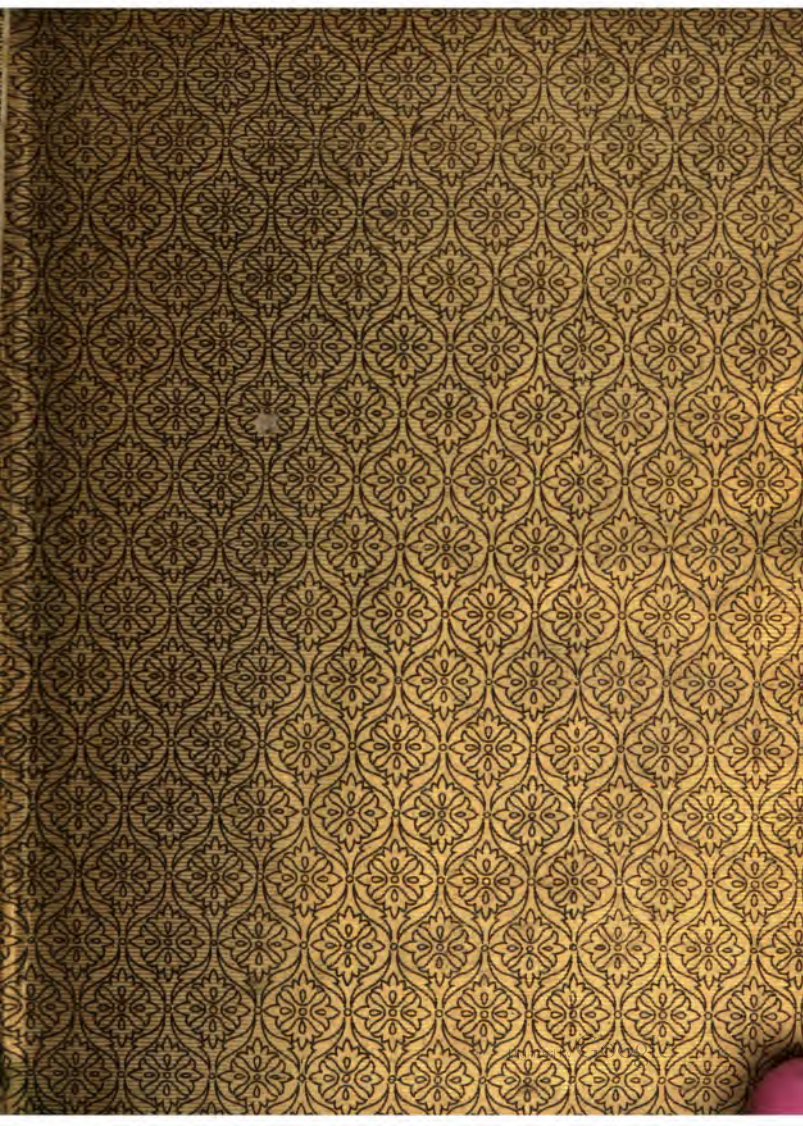


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COLLECTION
OF
BRITISH AUTHORS
TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

VOL. 2708.

KNIGHT-ERRANT BY EDNA LYALL.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

KNIGHT-ERRANT

BY

EDNA LYALL,

R. C. Bayly
AUTHOR OF "WE TWO," "DONOVAN," ETC.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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KNIGHT-ERRANT.

CHAPTER I.

A RESCUER.

“Such was the life Thou livedst, self-abjuring,
Thine own pains never easing,
Our burdens bearing, our just doom enduring,
A life without self-pleasing.”—FABER.

MR. GEORGE BRITTON was a man who seldom ate the bread of idleness, and since his hurried visit to Naples in the early summer his holidays had been few and far between. A cruise of a few days in the *Pilgrim* before the close of the yachting season had been all he could snatch from his busy life, for he was one of those men who are always going out of their way to help other people, and this cannot be done without an expenditure of time and labour which is often scarcely realised. He was so kind-hearted, so genial a man, that he numbered his friends by hundreds; and his life brought him into contact with such hosts of people that it was often all he could do to remember the names of those he had helped, to say nothing of their faces. He

had not, however, altogether forgotten Carlo Donati; more than once he had thought of his pretty niece's ill-fated love-story, but having promised to say nothing about it, even to Miss Claremont, he had thought it best to mention Carlo's name as little as possible.

"Yes, I saw him," had been his cautious reply to Clare's questions; "but the Signora Donati is dead, and I fancy there will not be so much communication between the two houses now. I myself liked the fellow very much, but he has some political ideas which annoy my brother."

That was all that had passed with regard to Carlo during the nine months which had since gone by. Clare felt a little sorry and disappointed as she realised how hard it is not to grow apart from old friends whom there is no chance of meeting; but she remembered that it was the way of the world, and that in her wandering life she must try to be content with touching people closely for the time, and then passing off the scene to make room for fresh comers. It crossed her mind once or twice to write to Carlo and send him her sympathy in his trouble about his mother; but such letters are hard to write, and she was so busy that somehow the time never came. She contented herself with inquiring after him in her next letter to Francesca; but Francesca was a shockingly bad correspondent, and when, in two months' time, she replied to the letter she made no mention at all of Carlo.

Mr. Britton's business often took him from Ashborough, where his own works were carried on, to a place in the neighbouring county—Mardentown; and one cold, dreary, March afternoon he was pacing the

platform of the Mardentown station, waiting for the train that was to take him home. He was not alone. One of his many acquaintances had walked to the station to see him off, and was pouring out some of his own troubles into the shipbuilder's sympathetic ears, when he became conscious that his friend was not listening quite so attentively as usual, and following the direction of his eyes, exclaimed,—

"Oh! you are noticing those Italians. I thought they all went off yesterday: there was quite a crowd of them last night. It's an Operatic Company; that's the Impresario, that sullen-faced man with a black beard; and that's his wife, the *prima donna* of the party. I suppose the rank and file went off yesterday and left a few of the swells behind."

"Curious," said Mr. Britton, glancing again at the little group; "that fellow is like a man I met at Naples last year! But, after all, foreigners always look more or less alike. He's a handsome fellow; isn't he?"

"The young one, do you mean? Yes, but too small; that's always the way with Italians. He looks bigger on the stage, though. I saw him the other night in *Marta*. What on earth was he called—Sardoni? No; that was the tenor. I forget. One mixes up these outlandish names so. Look, they are sending him to the bookstall to get the local papers; no doubt they want to read the criticisms on their singing."

The talk turned once more upon other matters, and the two friends paced up the platform; then, warned by the big bell that the train was coming into the station, retraced their steps.

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Mr. Britton, clutching his friend's arm. "Look! A child on the line!"

He rushed down the platform, while at the same instant warning cries, shouts, and a heartrending shriek in a woman's voice, filled the air. It was all over in a few seconds, and yet there seemed time to take in all the details—the horror of the spectators, the utter helplessness of the child himself, who stood terrified and bewildered, hearing the shouts, seeing the train approaching, and yet too completely paralysed by fear to move, literally frightened out of his wits. Mr. Britton dashed on and had almost reached the spot when a slight, lithe figure darted across the platform in front of him; it was a wonder that they did not knock each other over, but the Italian just swerved to the left in time, leapt down on to the railroad, and ran like the wind to the rescue of the child. There was a moment of intense pain to all the spectators; people held their breath; would the child be saved, or would he and his rescuer be cut down together? The chances seemed about even: not a little depended on the man's strength, and the child might, no doubt, help or hinder his own rescue. The train was slackening speed, yet it seemed to advance with a rapidity that was frightful to watch. It was almost upon the child; the women hid their faces, the men strained their eyes to see what would happen, while the rescuer gave a cry, at the sound of which the child turned, ran a step or two with uplifted hands, and was caught up in the strong arms of the man who had saved it from death. The next instant they were in the six-foot way, and the train passed on and hid them from view.

Mr. Britton drew a deep breath, and, now that the horror of the moment was over, found time to wonder at the cowardice of the spectators. There were several men on the platform, some of them far nearer than he had been at the time the alarm had been given; but no one had rushed instantly to the rescue except himself and the young Italian who had intercepted him.

"Of course," he overheard one man remark to another, "I made sure the people who belonged to him would save the poor little beggar. They say he's the child of Merlino, but if so, Merlino did nothing but shout and tear his hair. Look here! there'll just be time for a brandy-and-soda; I declare it's given me quite a turn."

The speakers ran at full speed to the refreshment-room, and Mr. Britton, with indignation in his heart, turned to see whether the rescuer was in sight again. He was at that moment appearing at the far end of the platform, the child still in his arms. Mr. Britton joined in the eager little crowd which speedily surrounded him; but every one was talking and asking questions, so he held his peace, only looking and listening and feeling strongly drawn to the young Italian, who seemed not to consider himself at all in the light of a hero, or to be troubled by the fear that the spectators might do so. An Englishman's first impulse would have been to escape from the eyes of the crowd; the Italian seemed not to consider at all what the onlookers might think of him; he was a little flushed and excited and much taken up with the child, who clung to him and refused to be given to his father.

"The dear little fellow," said Merlino, kissing his

son, with tears in his eyes. "He is not hurt? You are sure he is not hurt?"

"Not a bit, only frightened. How in the world did he get down there?"

"He owes his life to you, sir," said the station-master; "I never saw a closer shave!"

"It seemed almost upon us," said Carlo, "relentless as Juggernaut."

But, though he did not under-estimate the danger, it did not appear to make him feel the need of a brandy-and-soda. He turned in the most practical and matter-of-fact way to choose a carriage.

"You get in, Nita," he said, opening the door, "and I'll give you Gigi on your lap."

Mr. Britton, puzzled at the comparative indifference of the mother, took possession of a corner-seat in the same carriage, and felt relieved to see that as she took the child she bent down and covered his face with kisses. In truth, poor Nita in that moment of horror had for the first time realised what the loss of her child would be to her; the agony of seeing him in danger, without being able to stir a finger to save him, had touched into life the motherly love which till now had lain dormant in her heart. But the shock had almost stunned her for the time, and it was not till she held Gigi in her arms that any sign of feeling escaped her. Carlo's face lighted up as he saw how closely she held the little fellow, and both he and Merlino were so much taken up with the child, that it was not till just the last minute that they thought of the luggage.

"Did you see it in, Gomez?" asked Carlo, turning to the Spaniard who had ensconced himself comfortably

in the corner opposite Mr. Britton, and beside Mlle. de Caisne.

"I? No, I imagined you had given directions," replied Gomez, with the most irritating air of calm dignity.

Carlo sprang up and put his head out of the window.

"It is gone," he said, "it must be all right."

"Ah, but my bag!" exclaimed Nita. "You really might think of things for me! I must have left it on one of the benches."

The train was on the point of starting, Carlo flung open the door and rushed in search of the lost property, while Merlino, fuming with impatience and anxiety, hurried across the carriage to look from the window.

"*Santo diavolo!* we are moving!" he exclaimed. "What induced you to be so careless, Nita! Valentino will be left behind—he'll be too late for the opera. There! I told you so," as the train steamed on relentlessly, and a porter closed the door with an authoritative bang, regarding neither the nerves nor the anxieties of the travellers.

"There's not a creature who can take his part to-night, you know there's not, and Marioni won't have rehearsed anything else," stormed Merlino, swearing at his wife, and wholly disregarding the presence of a stranger. The babel that ensued was deafening, Gigi adding not a little to the confusion by bursting into tears, and crying as only children of that age can cry. Mr. Britton began to wish that he had chosen another carriage, yet was obliged to own that these people interested him, and that there was something rather

amusing in this glimpse of life behind the scenes. He got out his train-book to see whether there was any other train which would bring the missing singer away from Mardentown in time for the opera, and wondered whether these people were going to Ashborough, or to its near neighbour and rival, Queenbury.

Just at this minute, however, the train stopped at a suburban station, and to the relief and astonishment of all, Carlo suddenly appeared at the door.

"Where on earth did you come from?" exclaimed Merlino.

"The guard's van," said Carlo, taking the vacant place beside Mr. Britton, and evidently perceiving that the atmosphere was disturbed. "I am afraid I gave you all a fright, but there was no chance of getting back to you, only just time to make a dash at the last carriage. I seem fated to run races with the train to-day."

There is nothing more strangely trying than the sudden reaction after great anxiety. Merlino, whose temper was always irritable, was now in the worst possible humour; the very perception that he owed a deep debt of gratitude to his brother-in-law chafed him into greater rudeness and harshness. As for Carlo, when he had put the bag up in the netting, he resigned himself to the inevitable, and bore the storm for the most part in silence, interposing a word or two when he thought it would be any use, but knowing too well that Merlino in this sort of humour must be allowed to have his fling, and that any sort of argument would only make matters worse.

At the first opportunity he took Gigi on his knee,

and drawing a little further from Merlino, and nearer to Mr. Britton, began to do what he could to check the loud crying, which was irritating both the father and mother, and which had resisted all Nita's coaxing and Merlino's threatening.

"See, Gigi, you must be quiet," he said, lowering his voice a little.

"I thought you were lost," sobbed the child; "I was so frightened,—and—and I've lost my poor, dear, little soldier!"

When he had recounted this catalogue of woes his tears rained down faster than ever.

"You shall have another. Where did you lose it?"

"It dropped down where the train goes, and I jumped down to look for it, but I couldn't see it nowhere, and then they shouted, and the train came by."

"Well," said Carlo, holding the child closer, "you must never get off the platform again at a station; and as to the little soldier, why, we will get a new one tomorrow at Ashborough. See, dry your eyes, and be a man, and then we will hear about Lionbruno if you like."

"I don't want Lionbruno," said Gigi.

"Well, then, the 'Fair Fiorita,' or the 'Fairy Orlanda,' or shall it be about Buchettino and the Ogre?"

"I think I'd like about Giucca, and, 'eat, my clothes, eat!'" said Gigi.

"Very well," said Carlo. And in English, since that was the language which Gigi liked best to talk, but with all the graphic imagery of an Italian, he told the story of Giucca's two visits to the farm; of how in his poor clothes they drove him away with scorn, but

when he came in velvet vest and gay raiment they invited him to dinner; and how in irony he had put the food in his hat and in his pockets, saying, "Eat, my clothes, eat! for you were invited,"—taking care to make a good dinner for himself into the bargain.

"Another," said Gigi, when this story was ended. By this time Merlino and his wife had settled down into their respective corners, Merlino and Gomez had taken up their papers, Nita and Mlle. de Caisne appeared to sleep; of the stranger Carlo had taken scarcely any notice, nor would it have embarrassed him, probably, had he known that Mr. Britton was listening to the stories quite as attentively as was Gigi.

"What shall it be? 'The Shepherd who made the King's daughter laugh?'" asked Carlo.

"No," said Gigi, "I'm so tired; I'd like to have about *Il Cristo*."

"Which story do you want?"

"Something new," said the child. "I'm so tired, —so tired."

"Well, once upon a time," began Carlo, who had no feeling at all as to the mixture of sacred and secular, —"once upon a time, *Il Cristo* was very tired, he had been going about from town to town you must know, and in the towns he never had a minute's quiet, for, of course, the people wanted to see him, and all day long they were coming and going, and talking and asking his help, so that he had no rest, and not even time to eat."

"That's like you, *zio caro*," put in Gigi.

"And just at this time he was sad as well as tired; for you must know that in that country was a bad king, and this one had taken one of *Il Cristo's* friends, with

whom he used to play when he was a little boy, and had shut him up in a great, gloomy old castle by the side of a lake, and when he had kept him in prison a long time he sent his soldiers one evening and ordered the good man's head to be cut off. When *Il Cristo* heard that his friend was dead you can fancy how sad he was, and how he wanted to be alone for a little while out of the hurry and the rush of the town: and he knew that his followers, too, were tired, for they had been travelling about, and had had hard work to do."

"Were they in his troupe, do you mean?" asked Gigi.

"Not exactly; but they travelled about with him; they were the men who tried hardest to do what he said. And just before this they had been travelling by themselves, which was much harder than travelling with *Il Cristo*."

"Did they travel on stuffy cars like this?"

"No, there were no cars then; most likely they walked, and it was hot like a furnace, and the sun beat down on their heads and the dust came in great clouds, and when they got back to the town they were tired out. Then *Il Cristo* saw how it was with them, and he said, 'Come away from the town and the hurry and bustle, come right away into the country and have a rest.'

"Then they were glad, and he took them in a ship to a place where he thought they would be quiet—a nice country place."

"I guess it was like Salem," said Gigi, *sotto voce*.

"But when they got there, why, what do you think? the people from the towns had got there before them

by a quicker way, and there was a crowd waiting for them which you should have seen!"

"Then the troupe didn't get a holiday after all?"

"Yes, but they did. *Il Cristo* took the work himself, and they rested, and just heard him talk."

"I guess they liked that better than walking in the sun," said Gigi, thoughtfully. "Why, do you know, *zio*, I feel kind o' rested listening to you here in this car; and they had the country and *Il Cristo* too. Do you think he would have been like that to tired men in our profession?"

"Why, yes, of course," said Carlo, smiling a little at the way the child identified himself with the company.

"I wish he'd take us to a country place. You look kind o' tired. I think he might."

"So he will when we really need it."

"Did *Il Cristo* travel about always like we do? And do you think he got nasty hotels and lumpy beds?"

"Often no bed at all; he said so once, not grumbling you know, he never grumbled."

"We do sometimes, don't we, when they're real bad?"

"Yes; but he made the best of things, and thought of other people before himself; so now, you see, when he was tired and sad he first took care of the followers, and gave them a rest, and then gave the great crowd of people a real good time, and let them come and talk to him, and cured the ones who were sick, and taught them how to be good, and before he sent them home again gave them plenty to eat."

"I guess I'm rather hungry just now," said Gigi. "May I have a brown dog?"

A "brown dog" proved to be a substantial-looking

biscuit, and by the time this had been discussed Gigi had grown sleepy. Gomez at the next station changed to a smoking carriage, and Carlo, taking possession of his empty corner, made the child comfortable, and suggested a *siesta*, while Mr. Britton was glad to have an opportunity of studying his features at leisure, and trying to compare them with his recollections of Carlo Donati when he had last met him. He saw that there was a likeness, yet at the same time a great difference, and this Signor Valentino, as he fancied his name to be, had a look of strength about him which Donati had lacked. It was hard to describe the great fascination of the face, the curves of the smooth cheeks and chin were beautiful, the dark moustache so slight that it did not hide the finely chiselled lips; the forehead was specially developed just above the eyebrows, the ear small and set high up in the shapely head, while the rough, dark hair, the high cheek bones, and the deep, brown eyes would alone have stamped him as an Italian. He had pulled his red Phrygian train-cap to a comfortable angle, and had leant back in the corner, with the child still in his arms. Mr. Britton could have wished that he had not chosen to go to sleep, for he would have liked to talk with him, and, perhaps, to say a word or two about his prompt rescue of the little boy, but he was evidently tired, and though from time to time he raised his eyelids and glanced out of the window at the country through which they were passing, he never seemed to notice his English travelling companion, or to have the slightest wish to talk. In fact, Carlo had for the time being forgotten his present surroundings altogether, Gigi's words had returned to

him: "I wish he'd take us to a country place." Now there were times when his longing for Italy was the keenest of pains, but there were also times when the mere recollection of his old home made him very happy. It was thus this afternoon; half asleep, half awake, his mind went back to the old familiar scenes; he saw the blue bay of Baja, and the pearly grey mountains of Ischia, and the smiling *campagna*, and the near hills, with their outlines broken here and there by umbrella pines. Then he wandered down the long, shady walks of the Casa Bella garden, and once more Francesca was with him, and just then the recollection of her was enough to make him happy; there were times when he hardly dared to think of her at all; there were times when memory was anguish, but there were also times when he could smile to himself with the happiness of the mere thought that Francesca lived and that he loved her.

"Is this Ashborough?" asked Nita from the other end of the carriage.

He was startled back into the present by a voice which seemed to him to be Captain Britton's.

"Yes; this is Ashborough, madam."

Could this traveller be the Captain's brother—the "Uncle George"—whose arrival at Naples he so well remembered?

He felt uncertain. It might be only that his half-dreamy recollections of Casa Bella had made him fancy some familiar tone in this Englishman's voice. It was hardly likely that Mr. Britton should happen to get into the same carriage with them. Besides, he had never connected him with the neighbourhood of Ashborough; he fancied Merlebank was in another county. And

even if this should indeed be Francesca's uncle, would it be very desirable to introduce himself under the circumstances?

While he wondered what to do, the train had steamed into the station, and his doubts were solved and his opportunity lost at the same moment. Someone on the platform recognised the grey-bearded Englishman, and threw open the carriage-door.

"Ha, Britton! are you here? I'm just off to Queenbury, and will take your vacant place."

"How are you?" said the Englishman, with a hearty grip of the hand. "Any of my people here, do you know?"

"The carriage wasn't up just now; hindered, very likely; the town is in an awful confusion—the races on Monday, you know."

Carlo heard no more. He had to carry Gigi to the nearest fly, and the flies seemed scarce and mostly engaged. When at length he had secured one, and made over Gigi to his mother, he had to rush off and see to the luggage, and there was no time to think any more of his own plans.

In the meantime, however, Mr. Britton had not lost sight of him. He felt strangely curious as to the movements of these operatic people, and being obliged to wait till his own carriage came up, he strolled to and fro, glancing now out of the station at the driving rain and the chilly March night, now at his late companions. As usual, it appeared that "Signor Valentino" did the work, the others all crowded into the one available fly, and sat impatiently waiting while he hunted up truant trunks and portmanteaux.

"What an age you have been!" was the greeting he received. "You can't get in here! Perhaps there'll be another fly by this time. Do you think the man can take all the luggage outside?"

"He'll have to," was the reply. "There's nothing else to be had nor any chance of getting anything. It seems it is the race week."

"Can't you change places with him, Signor Gomez?" said Nita, for once in her life prompted to think for her brother. "His cough is so bad he oughtn't to be out on such a night."

Gomez made a dignified excuse, and suggested that if they delayed any longer it would be impossible to dine before the opera.

"And by-the-by, Val, my dear fellow, just stop in passing at the theatre," exclaimed Merlino; "you'll notice it on your way to the hotel, and might just see that all is right there."

"Very well. Is my umbrella handy?"

They gave it to him and drove off, while Carlo began to wrap up his throat in a huge muffler, looking distastefully enough at the dark, muddy street, and the torrents of rain. He was just about to set off on his wet walk when, on turning to ask the nearest way to the hotel, he suddenly confronted Mr. Britton.

"I am expecting my carriage every minute," said the Englishman, in his kindly voice, which, but for the absence of the slight tone of patronage, would have been exactly like Captain Britton's. "I hope you'll allow me to drive you to your hotel."

"You are most kind," said Carlo. "I should indeed be very grateful; but perhaps I ought to tell you——"

He was interrupted. Mr. Britton, glancing round to see if the carriage had come, chanced to notice a huge advertisement of Signor Merlino's Operatic Company, and his eye was instantly caught by a name in large black letters—SIGNOR CARLO DONATI.

"I must beg a thousand pardons, Signor Donati, for not recognising you before!" he exclaimed, shaking him heartily by the hand. "I thought I knew your face on the Mardentown platform, but I heard them call you by the name of Valentino, and, moreover, had not the slightest idea that you were in England or that you had changed your profession."

"The change was only just decided on when you left Naples, sir," said Carlo, his colour rising a little. "I hope you have good accounts from Casa Bella?"

He tried to subdue the eagerness of his tone, but it was some time since he had heard from Enrico, and the thought of hearing of Francesca in so much more direct a way made every pulse in him beat feverishly.

"Very good, indeed," said Mr. Britton. "They all seem well. Francesca is coming to stay with us in the summer, I believe. It was an old promise, and I think the change will be good for her. Here is the carriage at last. Now I am quite at your disposal. Shall we call first at the theatre, and then shall I drop you at your hotel? Or are you, too, in a hurry to get your dinner?"

He had kindly made a rather lengthy speech, because he saw how much the Italian was moved by his reference to Francesca. Carlo asked to stop at the theatre, and Mr. Britton, who understood now that his brother's objection to the marriage had had to do with

the stage and not at all with political matters, determined to show that he, at any rate, did not share in his prejudice.

"I suppose Valentino is just a nickname; it misled me altogether," he said. "But for that I think I should have spoken to you, and asked, at any rate, whether you were related to Signor Donati, the Neapolitan advocate."

Carlo smiled. Not for many months had he had such a pleasure as that friendly talk with Francesca's uncle.

"It is the name of what is supposed to be my best part—Valentino in *Faust*," he explained.

"I see. Well, I must manage to hear you in it. It is twenty years and more since I heard an opera."

"Then you have never heard *Faust*?" exclaimed Carlo, almost incredulously. "We are to give it to-night; may I really have the pleasure of getting you an order?"

"You are very good; I should like nothing better," said Mr. Britton, fully understanding that since his lady-love could not be present to hear him the next best thing was to have her old uncle, who might possibly tell her something about it. He felt convinced that such a thought had flashed through the young man's mind, and liked him the better for it, because, after all, it was so human, so precisely what he himself would have felt at four-and-twenty.

"You have a very bad cough!" he exclaimed, quite agreeing with the prima donna that Donati had no business to be out on such a night.

"Oh, it is only chronic!" said Carlo, lightly, as if

that made it an affair of no account. "Is this the theatre? Will you then come in with me, and choose your place for to-night?"

The ticket chosen, Carlo and Mr. Britton made their way through long and not particularly clean passages to the region behind the scenes. Here all seemed confusion; carpenters and scene-shifters hurried to and fro; there was a babel of talking, shouting, hammering; and Carlo's arrival was evidently hailed as a relief by the man in authority, who came quickly up to him to explain some difficulty that had arisen, and to ask whether Merlino would soon be at the theatre. Mr. Britton, meantime, was learning that scenery and stage illusions were disenchanting enough when nearly viewed, and in his own mind was wondering whether anything could possibly teach him to walk respectably on the sloping stage. It was evident that Carlo was a practical man, for his suggestions were received as orders, and something like method began to be traceable in what had at first seemed the wildest chaos.

"I must not keep you waiting any longer," he said, after a few minutes, coming up to Mr. Britton; "thank you for all your kindness. They seem to have got behindhand here, and I must stay and help them a little."

"Will you not come and dine with me at the club?" said Mr. Britton; "it is close by."

"You are very good," said Carlo, looking at his watch, "but, to tell the truth, it is too late for me to dine now. I shouldn't be able to sing if I did."

"I hope you don't intend to starve yourself," said the Englishman. "Surely that can't be good for the voice."

"No," said Carlo, smiling; "I shall send out for

some oysters, or perhaps take a raw egg or two." Then, seeing Mr. Britton's look of commiseration, he laughed. "You know we make up for it at supper. I shall be as hungry as a hunter by the time the opera is over."

"Then I cannot take you to the hotel?"

"I think not, thank you; I must be here for the present. When all is ready I dare say I shall run and see that Gigi is none the worse for his fright, but they tell me it is close by. You will remember me to Miss Claremont."

"She will be delighted to hear you are in England; you must come over to see us at Merlebank; we are not much more than two miles from the town. Good-bye then for the present, and I hope you'll find the little boy has suffered no ill effects."

It was not till nearly eight o'clock that Carlo could snatch a minute to run and see after Gigi; hurrying along the wet and cheerless street he made his way to the hotel, and on the doorstep came suddenly upon Sardoni, who had gone on to Ashborough on the previous night with the rest of the company.

"So here you are at last," he exclaimed, "doing the dirty work as usual, I see. How are you, Val? I declare you look better."

In truth the meeting with Mr. Britton and the pleasure of having rescued Gigi had acted as a sort of stimulus, and Carlo, spite of a very tiring day, felt better than he had done for some months past.

"I'm as strong as a horse," he said, laughing, "should come in neck and neck with the winner of the Mountshire Handicap on Monday. Where is Gigi?"

"Sitting on the stairs when I last saw him; the place is packed, and I'm afraid they won't have given you much of a room; Gomez snapped up the only decent one."

Carlo waited for no more, but ran upstairs till he came upon the disconsolate figure of the little boy.

"Have you had something to eat, *mio caro*?" he asked taking the child in his arms and carrying him on.

"Yes, but there's no bed for me," said Gigi, piteously.

"How's that? one was ordered. Where have they put my portmanteau?"

"Up at the top," said Gigi, mournfully, "in No. 62; but there's no bed for me."

Carlo rang to inquire, only to be told that, the house being quite full for the race week, no more beds were available; and the only room, No. 62, proved to be a servant's room vacated just for the occasion, a dismal little place under the roof, smelling strongly of stale ham sandwiches. In the corner was one narrow truckle-bed.

"Never mind, Gigi," said Carlo, passing his arm round the child's neck, and winking a smile on the dismal little face; "you've slept in the overland trunk before now. Let us see if you have grown too long for it; you know it was rather fun last time. Yes?"

Gigi measured himself by the trunk, to the infinite amusement of the chambermaid, who volunteered to find him a pair of sheets.

"But as to blankets, sir, they're every blessed one of them in use," she added.

"Never mind, one of mine doubled will do for him,"

said Carlo, ruthlessly stripping the truckle-bed. "Now, Gigi, unlock the trunk for me, and we'll turn the things out on the floor and make room for you."

Gigi thought this fine fun; and what with pillows and blanket from the truckle-bed, and clean sheets which the chambermaid brought hot from the fire, the improvised crib was comfortable enough. But to Carlo it somehow suggested a coffin, and the thought of the danger the child had been in made him shudder as he bent down to kiss him.

"I do love you so," said Gigi, clinging to him with all his might. And Carlo hurried back to the theatre with the words ringing in his ears, and the feeling of the little child's arms still about his neck.

CHAPTER II.

"CLARE."

"But when I met him he was still the same;
The quiet, happy face that lighted up
As from a sunshine in the heart within,
Rejoicing whomsoever looked on it,
But far more whomsoever it looked on."

Ugo Bassi: MRS. HAMILTON KING.

THE schoolroom at Merlebank was one of those comfortable, nondescript sort of rooms, which have a charm for most people; it was a room where you did not feel bound to be on your best behaviour,—a room where you could read with both elbows on the table, or lounge in unconventional ease by the fireside. It was essentially a snug room, its green Brussels carpet

was comfortably shabby, its curtains were old-fashioned and faded, its walls were crowded with frameless oil-paintings, which the girls had brought home from the School of Art, and the books in its crowded bookshelves had evidently seen good service. Miss Claremont loved the room, and it was in a great measure her presence which helped to make it one of the pleasantest retreats in the house. In lesson hours she knew well enough how to make any unwary visitor feel himself *de trop*, but at all other times, on half holidays, or on Sundays, or in the long evenings, she liked nothing better than to sit and talk to anyone who chose to seek her out. She had now been at Merlebank for many years, and had given to each of the children the "mothering" they so much needed. In person Clare was short and slight, she was an insignificant-looking little woman, and took scant pains with her dress. But all these details were observed only by strangers; to those who knew her she was just "Clare," the one being in the world whose sympathy was always available, the only person who could brighten up a dull dinner, or entertain stupid visitors, or find good points in those whom the girls themselves condemned as odiously vulgar.

All the troubles and anxieties of the household gravitated by a natural law to the schoolroom. Clare would sit by the fire in winter, or by the open window in summer, and would listen to Mr. Britton's anxieties about the children, or to the grandmother's grief about her failing eyesight, or to Kate's difficulties in her district, or to the boys' hopes and fears with regard to examinations, or first loves, or vanished pocket-money,

Her clear, light-blue eyes could sparkle with fun, or grow soft with pity, or become thoughtful and patient, as she weighed the *pros* and *cons* of some puzzling question; she was the most delightful of confidantes, and her wide circle of friends did not scruple to work her pretty hard, for Clare was always supposed to like to hear everyone's woes. Probably she really did like it, and few went away from her un comforted, for somehow you were apt to leave the schoolroom feeling as if she had removed a crape veil from before your eyes, so that the most common and trivial matters of everyday life became far more interesting than you had imagined them to be.

Late on that March evening Mr. Britton, returning from Ashborough, made all speed towards the schoolroom, and as he had hoped, found Clare still sitting over the fire reading.

"The children have all gone to bed," she explained; "Kate waited till half-past ten, but she was tired with her choir practice."

"I am glad to find you up," said Mr. Britton, "for I have a message to you from an old friend of yours, who, to my great astonishment, proves to be in England."

"Not Francesca!" exclaimed Clare.

"Her next-door neighbour, young Donati; he sends you his kind regards and is very anxious to see you."

"Well, that is really a delightful surprise," said Clare. "I should like so much to meet him again, for as a boy he interested me a good deal. What can have brought him to England?"

"He has developed a voice, and has turned into an

operatic singer. That quite explains my brother's determination to have less to do with him, for you know the Captain disapproves of the stage as much as you do. However, I think I have managed to put two and two together, and to form a pretty shrewd guess as to Donati's reason for his sudden change of profession. It seems he has a sister; did you know her?"

"She was being educated in a convent when I was in Italy, but I saw her once or twice. Poor girl! she made some very foolish marriage, I believe, not long after we came to England. I never heard the rights of the story, but I know she eloped with someone."

"Oh, that was it! Well, she seems to have paid dearly for her folly, poor thing! for her husband is a brute, a more sullen, ill-tempered fellow I never saw. He is the Impresario of this travelling company which Donati has joined; the sister, Madame Merlino, is the prima donna. Let me see, what did he call her? Nita, I think."

"That was her name. I remember her as a demure little girl, shocked at Francesca's freedom."

"Well, she seems to be one of those pretty, helpless, unhappy wives who stand in such grave need of a protector. Now, when I was at Naples I heard nothing at all about this sister, but on the Sunday, Donati was introduced to me by my brother as one of the most promising young advocates at the Neapolitan bar, and his praises were sung to me in a way which I own rather prejudiced me against him. I couldn't help liking the fellow when I saw him, however; and you can imagine my surprise when, on the Tuesday morning, I found that my brother had quarrelled with

him, and that their friendship was at an end. He had decided on some course of action which the Captain disapproved, and said you would also disapprove. However, the matter was a private affair of Donati's and he bound me over to silence, telling me, however, that I should soon see all for myself, and should then agree with him. I got quite on a wrong tack, and thought it was some political difference, but surely this is the true explanation. I appeal to you now, Miss Claremont, as a reader of romances:—given a pretty actress, with a brute of a husband, and doubtless some not too reputable admirers, is it not conceivable that circumstances might arise which should induce her father, or her brother to sacrifice everything in order to save her?"

"Quite," said Clare; "and Carlo Donati would be the very man to throw himself into the breach in that way; there was something chivalrous about him, something one doesn't often meet with nowadays. Do you remember Mrs. Browning's lines?—

"The world's male chivalry has perished out,
But women are knights-errant to the last."

I always thought she wouldn't have written that if she had known Carlo."

"I think there is no doubt that he is playing the part of knight-errant now," said Mr. Britton, musingly; "and that he has a hard time of it. I doubt if he will succeed, though. The sister seemed to be a very shallow, heartless little woman. He is a noble fellow, much too good to be wasted on such a life."

He gave Clare a detailed account of what had passed that afternoon.

"I am sorry he has gone on the stage," she said. "I hoped he would have done great things. It seems to me that a man like that might have wonderful influence in public life."

"And yet in some ways he is admirably fitted for his present work," said Mr. Britton. "His voice is very fine, and his acting really first-rate; I went to hear him to-night, and was delighted with him. Would you care to see him to-morrow? I want you to look him up, for I think, poor fellow, he is leading the life of a dog; and he seemed so pleased at the thought of meeting you again. I have promised that the carriage shall take the Vicar into Ashborough in the afternoon; he preaches at St. Cyprian's in the evening. Would you like to go in, too? You might, perhaps, go for a drive with young Donati."

"It would be the best chance of seeing him alone," said Clare. "Thank you, I think I will go, and on Sunday I suppose he is sure to be disengaged."

Accordingly the next day Clare, having set down the Vicar at St. Cyprian's parsonage, drove to the Royal Hotel, and sent in her card with a little pencilled message asking Carlo to come for a drive. As she waited there she felt a little anxious, and even shy, for after all it was many years since she had seen Carlo. Would time have raised a barrier between them? Would Signor Donati, the public singer, be less approachable than the frank, light-hearted, Italian boy, who at one time had almost worshipped her? The first glimpse of him, however, dispelled all her fears; he came quickly forward with the same eager boyish manner which she recollected so well, and took both her hands in his.

"How good, how kind of you to come!" he exclaimed. "This is the greatest pleasure I have had for a long time. Gigi," he turned to pick up a small boy, "this is Miss Claremont. Should you mind, Clare, if I brought him with me? Sunday has come to be considered his special property."

Clare was delighted to welcome the little fellow, and made many inquiries about his narrow escape of the previous day.

"What a great pleasure it must be to you now to feel that you saved him!" she said. "I have often wondered how a rescuer would feel afterwards."

"It's a satisfaction to feel that I have not failed in one thing undertaken," said Carlo, rather sadly.

At first sight Clare had thought him hardly altered, but on looking more closely at him she saw that his face, when in repose, bore signs of friction; and, though still very young-looking, told plainly of grief and sorrow undergone.

"That is a sad way of putting it," she said. "I thought, too, that you had had such very great success, —Mr. Britton led me to believe so."

"You see," he replied, "every artist leads a double life; just at that moment I was thinking more of my own personal side of the question, but really sometimes I think I'm making a failure of both."

"But you have surely had a very rapid success?"

"Don't think I am ungrateful for my reception," he said. "I know I have made what the world calls a success, but I'm not yet satisfied with myself; and each time I go on the stage I feel that I may fail utterly. An artist's life is a life of eternal anxiety. But then

to counterbalance that we have moments of inspiration, and they are worth all."

Clare was surprised at his sudden fervour.

"You really like your new profession, then?" she said. "I remember you were always fond of music."

"I don't know how I should get on without it," he said. "It is not only the music that is such a great delight, it is the getting out of one's own world, the living in the characters of others, the sense of holding the attention of one's audience and playing upon their emotions, and the pleasure of giving pleasure. Besides, there is a kind of satisfaction in being what you were meant to be."

"Had you long intended to take up this way of life?"

"No; but Piale had fully educated me for it. I was an advocate, you know, though I had never practised."

"And I suppose it was your wish to be near your sister which prompted you to make the change?" she said.

He was surprised, and yet relieved, that she had guessed as much.

"It was my last promise to our mother," he said. But he was quite silent as to the sacrifice it had been to him to take up the profession; and Clare, who had not the faintest suspicion of his love for Francesca, could not, of course, realise what he had been through. She wondered whether his plan had been a wise one, and recalled Mr. Britton's description of Madame Merlin, and his conviction that in this case chivalry would not avail.

"I know you don't approve of the stage," he said. "Had I thought you would have seen things as I saw them I should have written to you when we first came to England, for I was horribly lonely then."

"I wish you had," she said, with warm sympathy. "Indeed, I should not have argued with you through the post! Nor will I argue now. It is quite impossible for me really to judge: I know too little about the stage."

"Yet you do disapprove in your secret heart," he said, rather wistfully. He could not help longing for Clare's benediction on his efforts.

"Perhaps it seems to me a little like doing evil that good may come," she said, hesitatingly. "But that may be only my British prejudice."

Then, seeing a sad look in his eyes, she added, quickly,—

"But, as I said before, Carlo, it is impossible for me to judge. What did Captain Britton say to it?"

"He shared in the British prejudice."

A look of such deep pain flashed across his face that her heart smote her; she had spoken without very much thought, forgetting that Carlo would probably feel sore-hearted still at the recollection of the quarrel with the Captain which Mr. Britton had mentioned. Of the true state of the case he had nothing to tell her, and the best of friends cannot avoid now and then wounding each other in the dark.

"As a matter of fact, you know," she said, in her sweet, bright way, "I am a very ignorant woman as to these matters. I have never been inside a theatre, I have never come across people connected with the

stage, and I have no doubt that the evils connected with theatrical life are painted more darkly than they need be. Indeed, I should be very glad if you could convert me."

"Then this shall be the first step in your conversion," he said, smiling. "Look at these two ladies whom we are just going to pass on the left."

Clare looked, Gigi kissed his hand, and the ladies bowed and smiled as Carlo raised his hat.

"The tall one has a beautiful face!" exclaimed Clare. "So dignified and sweet."

"That is Mlle. Borelli, our contralto; she is one of the noblest women I know. The other is Mlle. Duroc, her great friend."

"A nice face, but not so striking as the other," was Clare's comment. "Well, Carlo, I am glad to have seen them. Perhaps you will some day convert me altogether and make me approve of theatres."

The talk turned on other matters, and before they parted Clare made Carlo promise to come over to Merlebank the next afternoon, and to bring Gigi with him.

Curiously enough, however, the question of theatrical life was to be handled once more that day, and not with Clare's moderation.

St. Cyprian's was some way from the Royal Hotel; but Carlo, having chanced upon a very dreary service in the morning at a neighbouring church, was determined to go farther afield, and hearing from Sardoni that it was considered one of the finest churches in England, resolved to seek it out.

"It's at least a mile," said Sardoni; "however, the

choir is worth hearing, and if you're going I don't mind going with you."

So the two set off together, arriving somewhat late, and having to content themselves with places at the very back of the church. Carlo felt strangely tired; but he was very happy in having met Clare and Mr. Britton once more, and he was glad Sardoni had volunteered to come with him. The beautiful building, and the music, and the service, which was always associated in his mind with Naples and Francesca, would, even in their mere external aspect, have been a refreshment; and he was gaining the rest he much needed when the sermon began, and startled him back into his working-day existence. For the preacher, sitting in his country vicarage, and well conversant with all the pleasures of the country, which seemed to him the only pleasures worth enumerating, had written a fierce diatribe against the pleasures of the town, and notably against theatre-going. Perhaps it had not occurred to him that members of the obnoxious theatrical profession might be numbered in his flock; apparently he considered them all to be reprobates, for he spoke of them in no measured terms, and denounced their profession as an unhallowed calling. Carlo was the more pained by the attack, because the preacher was evidently a man of great earnestness, a good, upright, honest man, not a mere denouncer. It was hard, too, to have his brief respite from work disturbed and spoiled by so untimely an assault. He tried not to listen, but the mere desire not to hear made it impossible for him to lose himself in other thoughts, and whether he would or no the words fell upon his ear.

"My brethren," continued the preacher, "I look at the hoardings in your town and see how, even in this solemn time of Lent, the world seeks to ensnare you. I see that, not content with the usual number of theatres, another must be opened for the performance of operas; and I fear that you may be tempted perhaps to snatch at a passing pleasure. Let me urge you to withstand the temptation; let me implore you, as you value the health of your own souls, to shun this false and ensnaring pleasure, the influence of which must be harmful—may be deadly. Most truly, most wisely do we sing the words—

‘Christian, dost thou see them
On the holy ground;
How the troops of Midian
Prowl and prowl around?’”

Carlo was for the moment so much tickled by the implied comparison between the wandering troupe of Merlino and the prowling troops of Midian, that he had some difficulty in keeping his countenance. He did not dare to look at Sardoni; but, taking up a book, read the rest of the hymn, reflecting sadly that even the much-abused members of the "unhallowed calling" did sometimes try their best to overcome "By the merit of the holy Cross." The attack grieved him; it seemed like the embodiment of the cause which had separated him from Francesca. He had learnt, moreover, to love his profession; he believed in it with all his heart; he knew that it need no more be an unhallowed calling than the calling of the poet, or the painter, or the sculptor, or the novelist. This preacher clearly failed to understand the highest meaning of art—he had no sense of the

artistic side of life; neither had he any sense of humour, or he would instantly have perceived the ludicrous turn which might be given to his application of the "troops of Midian."

This particular Midianite began to wonder whether, if he from the stage had begged people to shun the church and to refrain from giving at the offertory, the preacher would not have denounced him as a man who wilfully robbed another of his daily bread. He went on to picture to himself the immediate consequences of any marked falling-off in the attendance at the theatre: he thought of the heavy loss to Merlino, the severe trial to his temper, the consequent misery and suffering of all about him, the possible effect on Anita. Then he went on to generalities, and tried to imagine the effect upon art if the best and purest followed the preacher's advice, and went no more to the theatre. He saw how the good, and the elevating, and the lofty in the drama would perforce fail for lack of support; and how the only thing that would pay would be that which pandered to the lowest and vilest tastes. He felt that the members of his profession, in such a state of things, would be placed in a grave dilemma; unfit for any other calling, they would be forced either to let their talents rust unused, and to sink into poverty and distress, or to debase themselves by taking work which they knew to be unworthy of them.

He would have liked to put such a case to the preacher and he felt curious to see what sort of man he was; but they were quite at the back of the church, and an intervening pillar hid the pulpit from view.

Feeling, somehow, that the sermon had shut him

out from the fellowship which he expected to find in a church, and had made him an alien even in the body to which he rightfully belonged, he made his way out again into the dark, dreary street, up which the March wind blew gustily. A sense of intolerable fatigue came over him.

"What a pace you are walking at, Jack!" he exclaimed. "One might think you were blessed with the seven-leagued boots, and were keeping up with Sirocco!"

Sardoni modified his pace; and Carlo, glancing at him, saw an expression about his mouth which boded no good.

"I'm sorry we came in for that sermon," he said.

"Well, at any rate, it will serve to show you what British prejudice is!" said Sardoni, speaking more fiercely than the occasion seemed to warrant. "I don't know what effect it will have as to theatre-going, but I know that I shan't darken the doors of a church again in a hurry!"

Carlo was silent, knowing that his companion was far too angry to be reasoned with; and not another word passed between them on their way back to the hotel.

CHAPTER III.

AN ENGLISH HOME.

"Nor hath thy knowledge of adversity
Robbed thee of any faith in happiness,
But rather cleared thine inner eyes to see
How many simple ways there are to bless."

LOWELL.

THE next day, according to his promise, Carlo went over to Merlebank.

"How good of you to come," said Clare, hastening forward to greet him as he was shown into the drawing-room; "I was afraid this gloomy afternoon might frighten you away. I must introduce you to Francesca's cousins whom you have so often heard of."

Carlo looked eagerly enough to see if he could trace any likeness to Francesca in the four girls who came up in frank and friendly fashion to shake hands with him. Kate, the eldest, was about her age, and he instantly perceived that she had the same English-grey eyes—dark grey, with no blue in their depths. Though, however, she was a nice-looking girl, she made no pretensions to beauty; but every now and then a tone in her voice would thrill him by its likeness to Francesca's, and he felt much attracted by her, though he perceived at once that she was passing judgment on him, and that her manner was more critical and less friendly than that of the younger girls.

Lucy, the second sister, was fairer and prettier, and seemed to be the sweet-tempered one of the family, but she interested him less than Kate, whose slightly aggressive manner piqued him into curiosity. Molly

was a rather tomboyish young person of fourteen, with a frank hail-fellow-well-met manner; and Flo, the baby of the family, was just eleven, a slim little girl, with short, fair hair, and very short petticoats, who enjoyed life in a kittenish sort of way, and, while much petted by everyone in the house, had somehow just escaped spoiling.

Clare sat, looking wonderfully natural, in the corner of the big Chesterfield sofa, and made him sit beside her, where they could talk comfortably together, a little removed from the group of girls who, on the other side of the hearth, clustered round Gigi and made much of him. The drawing-room was such a room as Carlo had never before seen, and after the weary round of dingy lodgings and second-rate hotels to which he had of late been accustomed he could fully appreciate it. It reminded him just a little of the *salotto* at Casa Bella in its air of comfort and homelikeness, but whereas the Casa Bella room had a semi-Italian air, from its Canti-galli *plaques* and pottery, and its striped silk *couvrettes*, this room was thoroughly and typically English. A second room, visible by day, was curtained off in the evening, when snugness reigned supreme; a fire of coals, crowned by a huge log, burned in the low, wide grate, and sent a ruddy glow over the brass fender and dainty brass fireirons; while a warm-toned Persian carpet and wall-flower-red curtains harmonised well with the salmon-tinted walls, upon which were gathered a wealth of pictures that at once attracted Carlo's eye, though the names on the massive gilt frames, Brett, Ansdell, Vicat Cole, and Millais, conveyed to him, as a foreigner, no special meaning.

Clare was a little afraid of alluding to Casa Bella after her rather careless speech of the preceding day, but she spoke of the Ritters, and of other mutual friends, and asked endless questions about Naples and Pozzuoli which Carlo was enchanted to answer. For many months he had been utterly cut off from all his old ties, and from the people who could sympathise with them; it was delightful to him to go over the familiar ground once more with some one who knew it and loved it almost as well as he did. To be with Clare again made him feel strangely young and light-hearted. He forgot Anita and Comerio; he forgot all the petty jealousies and disputes of the Company; he even forgot his own private troubles, found genuine relief in speaking Francesca's name, and could almost have fancied that he was once more a boy, resolving to work and wait till he could present his name to Captain Britton with the prefix of *Avvocato*.

"You can stay a nice long time, I hope?" said Clare. "Mr. Britton will be coming in soon, I think, and he specially wished to see you. He so much enjoyed your singing on Saturday."

"This is my off day," explained Carlo, "so I am not bound to be back by any special time. It is *Fra Diavolo* to-night, and I have no part in that."

"Is that your only chance of a holiday? Do you mean that you sing all the other nights of the week?"

"That just depends on whether the engagements dovetail into each other. Very often they do. When the town is important we generally stay a week, and then the round seldom varies. Arrive on Sunday, *Faust* on Monday, *Fra Diavolo* Tuesday, *Somnambula*.

Wednesday, *Lucia* Thursday, *Barbiere* Friday, *Rigoletto* Saturday, on to the next place on Sunday."

"Is the travelling always done on Sunday?"

"Not always, but very frequently. You see it is the only day you close your theatres. Now with us the theatres are shut on Friday, but we play our best operas in our best style on the *Festa*. There is something to be said for both sides of the question. Last week we had engagements of two and three nights only at small places, and travelled here in detachments, the bulk of the company by special train on Friday evening, the rest of us on Saturday afternoon. So at Ashborough the days are slightly varied, and on Thursday we move on to Queenbury for two nights."

"It must be a very hard life," said Clare.

"It is no light work, as some people seem to fancy, specially when the winter is so severe."

"Yes, you must have felt the cold dreadfully."

"I have at any rate learnt to appreciate warmth. The only drawback is that in England it seems impossible to be warm on both sides at once. You may scorch your shins at the fire, and yet the back of your leg will still be frozen! But I see you understand here how to build up a glorious fire. We don't come across such fireplaces as that."

While he talked he watched with the interest of a foreigner all that was going on, wondered for what reason the footman appeared with a trivet and a bright copper kettle, and speculated as to the little folding table which was being set up on the other side of the fireplace. A daintily-worked cloth was spread over it, then came the explanation in the form of a beautifully inlaid ebony

and silver tray, with the most fascinating of silver tea-services, and delicate blue and white china cups.

"This is just like Salem," announced Gigi. "We've never had real proper tea since Salem."

Carlo, seeing that Kate had some unknown designs on the copper kettle, hastened to offer his services.

"Tea-making is a process I have never seen," he said, wondering what on earth he was to do with the kettle now that he had valiantly seized upon it.

"Thank you, a little in the teapot, please," said Kate. "That will do."

He restored it to the trivet, and noticed that Kate's hands were exactly like Francesca's. He could not take his eyes off them as she measured out tea from a pretty little silver caddy with a silver cockleshell. They were not luxuriously brought up girls, in spite of their father's wealth. They were accustomed to helping themselves, and did not care to have servants always at their beck and call. Indeed, Kate was of so independent a nature that she would willingly have dispensed with Carlo's assistance, and observing that the kettle did not boil, she set it further back on the trivet, and with something a little defiant in her expression, prepared to take it off at the critical minute.

"What was the first edition for?" asked Carlo.

"Oh, that was to warm the teapot, a very important part of the matter," she explained.

"Pray let me have my share in this mysterious process," said Carlo, forestalling her as she was about to carry off the kettle in triumph. "It has to me, you know, all the interest of a new experiment in chemistry."

"You don't mean to say Francesca hasn't introduced afternoon tea yet at Casa Bella?"

There was a general exclamation.

"You see in Italy we naturally enough go in more for cooling drinks. She was very clever at making lemonade."

He felt himself colouring at the recollection of that hot summer day in the Rose-room, and was glad to turn his back on the five pair of eyes, and to put the kettle again on the trivet. A further diversion was made by the entrance of the servant with cakes and thin bread-and-butter and a great dish of crumpets, which was set down in the fender to keep hot. There was something charmingly easy and informal in the whole thing, Carlo thought; he wondered what it was that gave the English their special power of making homes, and once more the tone of Kate's voice took him back with a pang that was half of pleasure, half of pain, to the thought of Francesca. For a minute he called up the picture of what might have been. He saw the Villa Bruno with the alterations which she would have made in it; he possessed in imagination the wife and the home which he had renounced; and the dream was so sweet that it was almost worth the revulsion of feeling which quickly followed.

There must have been a brain-wave between him and Kate, for at that moment she startled him with the question, "I suppose they have new neighbours now at Casa Bella? Who took your house when you left?"

"It was taken by Count Carossa," he replied. "Mr. Britton met him at Naples on Whit Sunday. He has a yacht not unlike the *Pilgrim*, and was anchored close by."

"I remember now, father mentioned him. What sort of man is he? Will Uncle Britton like him?"

"I believe he was much taken with him," replied Carlo, hearing his own calm replies with a sort of astonishment.

"Uncle is dreadfully fond of people with titles," said Kate. "It is his one weakness. Is Count Carossa really nice, do you think?"

"I have only met him once," replied Carlo. "He is quite young and very rich, rather an original sort of man, has travelled a great deal, and is a good *raconteur*."

He ran off the list of his rival's merits unfalteringly, but was secretly relieved by an interruption.

"Don't you hear wheels?" exclaimed Lucy, opening the drawing-room door that she might listen better.

"Yes, it is father!" cried little Flo, "for Bevis is waking up. See," she said, drawing Carlo's attention to a very old deer-hound which lay stretched out comfortably on the hearth-rug. "Bevis always does that when he hears the carriage, but when it is only people coming to call he sleeps right on."

In the hall there was a little bustle of arrival and welcome. The return of the father and son from business made one of the pleasantest of the daily events in that quiet country household. They brought with them a sort of atmosphere of the world which was refreshing. Generally there were commissions to be delivered, or library books to be eagerly seized upon, and invariably there was some sort of news to be discussed. Carlo realised something of this as Mr. Britton came into the room with Lucy, his favourite daughter,

clinging to his arm, and the dog Oscar, son to the elderly Bevis, at his heels.

The shipbuilder never showed to greater advantage than in his own house. Looking now at his clear grey eyes, his refined face, his thick white hair and snowy, well-kept beard, he seemed to Carlo the perfection of an English gentleman. His manner was delightful, a little more courteous than the manner of the Englishmen Carlo had hitherto come across, but free from all suspicion of formality, a manner that was genuinely friendly without being in the least over-familiar. He gave Carlo a hearty welcome, and turned to introduce him to his son, who seemed to be much what Mr. Britton must have been forty years ago.

Harry Britton had not yet acquired, however, his father's easy, genial way of talking; he seemed not quite at his ease with the Italian; and, after the greetings were over, moved away with a perceptible air of relief, which tickled Carlo not a little, and began to open the shiny black bag which he held in his left hand. From this he proceeded to dole forth various purchases which the girls had asked him to make, ending with the evening paper, which he as usual brought dutifully to Clare, with a little time-honoured joke which had for them all a halo of happy associations.

Carlo watched the little bit of by-play, and understood it all perfectly. It brought back to his mind the old days when Clare was in Italy, and had been to him just such a true, staunch, cheery friend as she was now to Harry Britton. To his tired brain there was something indescribably refreshing in that glimpse of home-life. It was a scene which he never forgot, and which

often returned to him with a sense of comfort in his wandering, homeless life. For there are people so genuine, so English, so whole-hearted, that they can make even afternoon callers feel, for the time being, one of themselves—can send them forth again with a pleasant, living picture in their hearts, and a consciousness that there is true friendliness and good-fellowship in a world which had seemed to them for the most part a place of weary formality and routine.

He felt a great wish to do something for these people, and knowing that etiquette forbade them to ask him to sing, and that Clare was anxious to hear him, he took advantage of some reference which Mr. Britton made to his singing in *Faust*, to offer to sing them "*Dio Possente*."

The unmistakable look of real delight which greeted the suggestion, and the eager way in which Molly and Flo ran to open the piano, pleased him more than the loudest public applause could have done. He sang very well, and entranced his hearers, rousing even Harry out of his shy reserve.

"Do you ever sing English songs?" he asked, when the chorus of thanks had ceased, volunteering his first uncalled-for remark to the Italian.

"Not very often," replied Carlo, wondering whether he could get through "Love for a Life," and, after a moment's debate, deciding to risk it for the sake of pleasing Francesca's cousin. "There is one song by my old Maestro with English words. Perhaps you know it?"

He struck a few chords, then broke into the introduction to the song which transported him once more to that first happy day of his betrothal. To sing it

was hard, and yet his very emotion gave him a power which he would not otherwise have possessed,—it made him able to bring tears into the eyes of more than one of his listeners—it set kind-hearted Mr. Britton weaving plans for a reconciliation, and imagining a happy ending to Francesca's love-story.

"I sang that for you," said Carlo, with a little bow of acknowledgment for Harry's warm thanks. "Now, if you are not quite tired of me, I should very much like to sing one song for Miss Claremont. You must choose it, Clare," he said, turning to her, and looking with a smile into her sympathetic eyes.

"May I really choose?" she said. "Then I should like that old favourite of mine, 'The Pilgrim of Love.'"

"That will also be an indirect compliment to the yacht," said Carlo, laughing. "Or was that called after the *Pilgrim's Progress*? But let me see, can I get through the words? How do you pronounce that bit I always used to come to grief over?"

"Nay, nay, courteous father?" suggested Clare, recalling merry disputes in the Casa Bella drawing-room.

"That was it! 'Curteous' or 'corteous'—how do you say it?"

They laughed over the old discussions, and discussed them over again, and after some little delay Carlo sang the song, and finally left them to be haunted for many a day to come by the refrain, "No rest but the grave for the pilgrim of love."

"He seems a nice sort of fellow!" was Harry's comment, when, the guests having departed, his natural

manner returned to him. "I say, it didn't matter, did it, my asking him if he sang English songs? I thought none of those operatic fellows did."

"Oh, dear no," said Clare. "Nothing pleases Carlo so much as to give pleasure."

"Well, it was awfully jolly of him to sing such a lot. He doesn't seem a bit stuck up. But, I say, why on earth can't they be called like ordinary Christians? Carlo and Gigi! Did you ever hear of a more horsey and doggy couple!"

"That's just your narrow-mindedness," said Clare, laughing. "Carlo is as good a name as Charles, and Gigi sounds no more foolish to an Italian than Johnny or Tommy to us."

"Well, Clare, for my part I don't understand your Signor Donati. If he is the sort of man he seems to be, why does he live such a useless life?" said Kate, with the severity of three-and-twenty.

"He may have many reasons which we don't understand," said Clare. "However, I candidly confess that I wish he would leave the stage. He looks to me terribly delicate."

"He is far too good for that Company," said Mr. Britton. "I shouldn't be at all surprised if he did leave the stage before long. I hope he may—I hope he may! There's something about him which quite fascinates one, though I do wish he could have been an Englishman."

The laughter evoked by this truly British remark was only checked by the warning clock, which made Clare and the younger girls beat a hasty retreat to the schoolroom, and sent Kate to read to her invalid grand-

mother, and to moralise in her own mind over Carlo's mistake in choosing so unworthy a profession.

CHAPTER IV.

A LAST STRUGGLE.

"O sweet, they tell me that the world is hard and harsh of mind,
But can it be so hard, so harsh, as those that should be kind?
That matters not; let come what will; at last the end is sure,
And every heart that loves with truth is equal to endure."

TENNYSON.

"Now, Miss Claremont, suppose just for once you were to come to the theatre?" remarked Mr. Britton at breakfast the next morning. "I see they are giving *Il Barbieri* on Wednesday night, and I have a sort of hankering to hear it once more. Will you come? Shall I take a box?"

But Clare was too staunch to her Puritan traditions, though she owned that she would much have liked to hear Carlo. As yet, however, he had not converted her; she still regarded the stage as at best a necessary evil, and felt bound to refuse Mr. Britton's offer.

"Then ask Signor Donati over to lunch to-morrow; it will be your last chance of seeing him; and I am afraid it is no good asking him to dinner, because, apparently, he can't sing after eating, and has to dine at some unconscionably early hour."

"I shall be going in to Ashborough at twelve o'clock in the pony-carriage, Clare," remarked Kate. "I can leave a note for you, if you like; or will you come in with me?"

Clare, who was fond of driving, said she should

like to come, so when lessons were ended she joined her ex-pupil, and, well wrapped up, was able to enjoy even the stretch of bleak, dusty road that lay between Merlebank and Ashborough.

"We need not leave the note, for there is Signor Donati!" exclaimed Kate, as they drove down the High Street. "I do hate to see a man in fur like that. He seems to coddle himself dreadfully. Harry says he took quite an age wrapping up his throat last night."

"We will just stop a minute or two, if you don't mind," said Clare. "I will speak to him, and see if he can come."

Carlo did not at first notice them. He was walking rather slowly down the street, with Gigi, as usual, clinging to his hand. He looked ill and depressed, but when Gigi eagerly drew his attention to the pony-carriage and its occupants, his face lighted up, and he seemed for the time to return to his old self.

"We were just coming to ask you to lunch with us to-morrow," said Clare. "Will you come, you and Gigi? I suppose you couldn't dine with us, could you?"

"I am afraid not, thank you, for I'm singing both to-night and to-morrow; but I shall be very glad to come over to lunch."

He had a short, hard cough, which made Clare look at him anxiously.

"You look very poorly to-day, Carlo," she said.

"I awoke to the sad consciousness that the wind had gone back to the east," he said, laughing.

"And that cough? It seems very bad."

"Oh, it is only chronic!" he said, with a smile.

"We have all suffered more or less from the long winter. It must be nearly over now; don't you think?"

"April and May are often nearly as cold," said Kate, perversely.

"Are they?" he said, with an expressive gesture. "My friend Sardoni has just given me a song called 'Welcome, cold North-easter,' but the very words make one's teeth chatter!"

"One o'clock to-morrow, then," said Clare as they drove on again.

He took off his hat and bowed in foreign fashion, and was sedulously imitated by Gigi.

"Dreadfully Italian!" said Kate, whipping up the ponies with a touch of irritation in her manner. "I can't bear a man to be a sort of barometer—pretending to know which way the wind is before he had been out: such nonsense!"

"I have known many people with susceptible chests who were able to do that," said Clare.

"But no Englishman looks so miserable just because it happens to be a cold day," said Kate. "It seems so effeminate to mind a little fresh air."

"My dear, if you had to work hard through a very hot summer in Italy, do you not think you might look flushed and over-tired?"

"Ah, but to feel heat is quite a different thing!" protested Kate. "There's nothing unmanly in that; why, don't you remember last August how limp and good-for-nothing Harry was in that very hot week?"

"Yes, because he was unused to it. You are illogical, Kate; it is not a bit more effeminate, as you say, to feel the physical effects of cold than of heat; the

only difference is that you understand one feeling and don't understand the other."

"That may be," said Kate, "but I don't like Signor Donati; and as to saying that he works hard, why, what man who is hard-worked would be sauntering down the High Street like that, with a child? I don't call his sort of profession work at all!"

In the meantime Carlo slowly made his way back to the hotel.

He was so tired and overdone that it was all he could do to bear Gigi's chatter. He wondered how he should get through with his "Count Rodolpho," remembered distastefully that he should have to make love to Mlle. de Caisne, who never would sink her own personality in that of "Lisa," and would have given all he possessed if any one had come to him with the news that for some good reason there could be no opera that night. Everything in the future which he had to undertake looked to him like a huge mountain which he must perforce climb; and, worst of all, he knew that the instant he faltered Comerio would come forward and offer to take his place. If it had not been for that thought he could have borne up better, but the consciousness that Gomez was carefully keeping watch on his health, like a vulture hovering over a dying man, and longing to swoop down on him,—this was almost maddening. He was troubled, too, about Sardoni, who, for the last day or two, had been unlike himself, moody and melancholy in the daytime, and wild and reckless towards night. He seemed to shun Carlo as much as possible, and when they were thrown together was so bitter and sarcastic that his friend could not imagine

what had come over him; it was so unreasonable, so altogether improbable, that the sermon of Sunday night should still be rankling in his mind, that such a notion never occurred to Carlo. He was altogether perplexed and felt very anxious about him, nor could he help perceiving with a pang that in the time of his own greatest need Sardoni had deserted him, wholly failing to notice his desperate struggle to keep up. How he got through his work he scarcely knew; luckily for him, his throat was not much affected, though he was feeling far too weak and ill to be in good voice. At any rate, he did not break down, and he began to see that at present he must content himself with this poor comfort, and put up with cold receptions and the wretched consciousness of artistic failure. He went home wondering what poor old Piale would have said could he have heard him, and congratulating himself that the dear old Maestro was not likely even to see the unfavourable critiques on his singing which must inevitably follow upon so wretched a performance.

On the Wednesday morning, after a very restless night, he woke much worse than on the previous day, and feeling positively sick at the thought that he must either get through the trying part of "Figaro" that night or confess his illness, get a medical certificate to prove his inability to appear, and thus give all into the hands of Gomez and Comerio. For he knew too well that no doctor in his senses would permit him to sing in his present state, that he would infallibly be ordered to rest; and for this reason, while taking every possible precaution throughout the winter, he had avoided doctors as he would have avoided the plague.

It was still just possible that he might struggle on till the warm weather came, then, in June, Merlino might, and probably would, renew the contract with him, and he should go to America with the troupe and once more baffle Comerio. If he could only hold out!

He lay in bed as long as he dared, then, knowing that Gomez would publicly comment on the fact if he failed to make his appearance, and that Merlino invariably wanted him if he happened to be late in the morning, dressed hastily, noticed with relief that he did not look nearly so ghastly as he felt, and went down to the crowded coffee-room. The hotel was full of people who had come down to Ashborough for the races; they were a noisy, disreputable crew; and as Carlo entered the room where they were all breakfasting before going to the racecourse, it seemed to him like coming into a pandemonium. His head was aching miserably, but his ears seemed preternaturally alive to the slightest sound, and he could distinctly hear several comments on "one of those operatic fellows" as he steered his way through the throng to the fireplace, nodding to Merlino and Tannini as he passed them.

"Good-day, Donati; how are you?" said a voice at his elbow.

He looked round and saw the Spaniard's malicious face.

"Good-morning," he replied.

"How are you?" repeated Gomez.

"I'm cold," said Carlo, drawing nearer to the fire, and determined that Gomez should gain nothing from his catechism. "They don't know how to build up fires in this place."

As he spoke he felt the Spaniard's searching glance, and knew that Gomez was far too shrewd not to find out the true state of the case. For although his rich, ruddy-brown colouring deceived many people, yet keen observers might easily note that day by day his cheeks grew more hollow, and that there were lines of pain about his mouth and eyes. There was to him a sort of horrible humiliation about it, for he had never been ill in his life, had thought it impossible that his perfect health should be broken, had almost laughed when Captain Britton had suggested the idea to him. It was useless, however, to blink the fact any longer; and when the place was quiet once more—the noisy guests gone off to the races, and Merlino and Marioni to the theatre—Carlo gave way, shivering from head to foot almost like one in a fit of ague.

"Cold morning, sir," said one of the over-worked waiters, putting fresh coals on the fire. "Have you breakfasted, sir?"

"I won't take anything, thank you," said Carlo, feeling not the slightest inclination for food.

"Some nice hot rashers, sir, or an egg?" suggested the waiter. But Carlo was not to be tempted.

"We shall have to put you on my '*Don't be dainty*,'" said Gigi, taking off his bib embroidered with this moral precept and trotting up to Carlo with it.

It was impossible not to laugh. The waiter smiled politely and withdrew, but returned before long with a cup of coffee.

"Try that, sir," he said kindly; "it's just fresh made and will do you good. You have a heavy cold coming on, sir."

Carlo was touched by the man's courtesy, he did not deny the advent of the heavy cold.

"Gigi," he said, "I'm afraid we must give up going to Merlebank to lunch. You shall take a note over there, if I can find someone to send with you."

"Are you ill, *zio caro*?" asked the child, frightened by the look of pain which he for the first time noticed in the face so familiar to him.

"The waiter says it's a heavy cold coming on, and anyhow I must save up for to-night. I'm sorry to disappoint you."

"I wish we could go," said Gigi, wistfully, "but I more wish you wasn't ill;" and he raised his quaint, pitiful, little face to Carlo's with one of those childish caresses which made Carlo feel that everything he had been through was worth while.

He sat down to write to Clare, and Gigi ran back to his beloved soldiers, monotonously chanting, in his rather pretty little voice,—

"'Pray, Mr. Frog, will you give us a song,
But let it be something that's not very long,'"
'Indeed, Mrs. Mouse,' replied Mr. Frog,
'A cold has made me as hoarse as a hog.'"

Carlo was fain to confess that day that it was a relief to get rid of his little companion. He sent him off to Merlebank with a friendly scene-shifter, and sat in a great arm-chair drawn close to the fire, bearing miserable headache and backache, yet finding a sort of relief in the consciousness that he could cough and shiver to his heart's content now that no one was near.

The morning passed in a strange quiet, like the pause before a storm; the very streets were deserted,

for all Ashborough was on the racecourse; Nita, who was not singing that evening, was still in her room; Mlle. de Caisne was closeted with her dressmaker; there was nothing to break the peace of Carlo's solitude, if indeed such feverish misery could be called peace.

The clock struck twelve, and he started from a troubled waking dream of Francesca to the recollection that in another eight hours he should have to transform himself somehow into Figaro; and with nervousness far greater than that which he had felt at his first appearance, he made his way to the private sitting-room which was the joint property of Merlino's company, and began to practise. But five minutes completely exhausted him, he shut the piano, and in a sort of despair stretched himself at full length on the heathrug.

"I don't know what is going to happen to me," he thought to himself, with the misery of a thoroughly healthy man for the first time attacked by serious illness. "But if I am to sing I can sing, that much is certain; I'll at least die in harness."

Resolutely driving back the crowd of cares that surged in upon him, taking advantage of his physical weakness, he lay in a sort of enforced quiet,—the quiet which can only come to a good man well schooled in self-discipline. He was failing, and knew it all too well, but he knew still better that he was but a unit in the great army of One who cannot fail, knew that

"He
Alone may say, 'Tis finished all and very good.'
We only do a part, and partly well,
And others come and mend it."

He must have dozed for a few minutes, for on sud-

denly opening his eyes he found that Nita had come into the room, and was looking down upon him with her beautiful, heartless face, and once again that look of suppressed excitement which had pained him so much at Birmingham.

"You are ill," she said, breathlessly. "You are not going to sing to-night?"

He was on his feet in a moment. "Certainly I am going to sing," he said. "Marioni advised me not to go out this morning, to save up for the opera, as I have a cold coming on."

"Where is Gigi?" she asked, with nervousness, which he hailed with relief. Since the child's narrow escape from death she had certainly learnt to think much more of him, and that she should trouble herself as to his safety was something quite new.

"Gigi has gone over to Merlebank with a note; I meant to have gone to see Miss Claremont, but thought it was wiser to save up for Figaro. I sent him over with Adamson, he'll take great care of him."

"But here is Adamson coming down the street alone. What can have happened to the child? Why did you send him?"

She refused to hear reason, but Carlo was only too glad to be scolded, for every word revealed to him how much she loved the child.

The discussion was soon ended by the arrival of the scene-shifter, with a message to the effect that Master Gigi was staying to lunch at Merlebank; and that Miss Claremont would bring him back in the carriage that afternoon.

Nita was pacified, and asked Carlo to accompany

her while she practised a new song; she seemed to forget her first impression on seeing him, got absorbed in the music, and thought no more of his possible illness and Comerio's possible advent. He was relieved, and presently went down to lunch with her, made a feint of eating something, and heard with satisfaction that a plan was proposed for hiring a brake and going on to the racecourse, since he knew that he should be left in peace most of the afternoon. But as the hours passed by he grew steadily worse, and not even the rest and solitude prepared him for the great effort of the evening. He was sitting crouched up by the fire, his head resting on his hands, when Domenica Borelli came into the room. She was tall and stately, with something both in her face and in her way of walking which revealed her character, a noble-minded, upright woman, whom to know was to revere. She was some years older than he was, and off the stage her face bore the stamp of its thirty years.

"I thought perhaps you would just go through '*Dunque io son*' with me," she said, as she crossed the room; then as she drew nearer, and could see his face more clearly, "but I'm afraid you are really ill, you don't look fit to be up."

"I would rather not try the *duetto* now, if you don't mind," he said. "Don't say anything to the rest; I may be better to-morrow."

"But you ought to see a doctor," she said; "you ought to have a rest, I am sure. Signor Merlino must find a substitute till you are fit to sing again, since Fasola is able to take so few of your parts."

"It may come to that," he said, with a sigh that

was almost a groan. "I wish I had a respectable understudy, who could at any rate do the work on occasion."

Domenica Borelli had a woman's quick perception, she instantly understood the whole story, that story to which Merlino was deaf and blind, though it concerned him so nearly. For the first time she understood Carlo. Hitherto she had liked him as a fellow-artist, now she felt that she longed to be his friend.

"Is there anything I could do to help you?" she said, and there was something in her kind, quiet, unsentimental tone which conveyed to him perfectly the sense of that true friendship which, though many deny it, can most assuredly exist between man and woman.

In his great distress of mind and body her help was precisely what he needed.

"Indeed you can," he said, with tears in his eyes. "If at any time I should be obliged to leave the company,—if I should fall ill,—will you be a friend to my sister and to Gigi?"

It was asking a hard thing of her, for she particularly disliked Anita, but, guessing his reason for asking her, she could not possibly have refused him.

"There is one other thing," he continued; "I am unhappy about Sardoni, he is in some trouble, I think. Be his friend, too, as you are mine."

She coloured, not feeling at all sure that Sardoni was the sort of man with whom friendship would be possible.

"I don't understand Signor Sardoni," she said, doubtfully.

"Nor I, just now, but he has been a good friend to

me. I wish you would see a little more of him; you might be his good angel."

She made no very definite promise, but something in her face satisfied Carlo.

"And you?" she said; "you mean to go on singing——"

"Till I come to grief,—yes. I shall make you a miserable Figaro to-night, but perhaps you'll put up with me."

There was something which touched her very deeply in his humility, for she knew how painful it must be to his artist nature to face the thought of attempting a part to which he could not possibly do justice.

"I shall have the satisfaction of acting with a brave man, at any rate," she said. "It needs no small courage to face an audience when you know you can't please them. Perhaps with rest, though, you may be feeling better; I shall not stay tiring you any longer."

"You don't know how much good you have done me!" he said, gratefully, feeling that her promise in case of his illness had removed part of the burden from his mind.

She left him to prepare as best he might for the evening, and to count the quarters chimed by the clock in the Town Hall much as a prisoner might have counted them while waiting for the hour of execution. Sounds of bustle and confusion in the street warned him that the races must be over; he left the sitting-room, feeling quite unable to meet the scrutiny of Gomez, or to endure the talk of any of his *confrères*, and dragged himself up to No. 62; and here, after a while, Gigi found him.

"What! gone to bed so early, San Carlo!" he exclaimed, trotting up, with his merry little face, but growing grave and gentle as the truth began to dawn on his childish mind. "Are you better now?" he asked, very anxiously.

"I am only resting. Don't look so frightened, *mio caro*."

"They sent you some flowers," said Gigi, putting a lovely bunch of snowdrops and aconites on the bed; "and here is a letter too."

Carlo tried to seem pleased, and to take an interest in the child's account of his day at Merlebank; then he opened Clare's letter. Mr. Britton would send the close carriage over for him in the morning, and hoped he would be well enough to come and say good-bye before leaving Ashborough to-morrow. The kind words cheered him, but he was much too ill to look so far ahead, and the words of an old eastern poem floated through his mind—

"To-morrow!—why, to-morrow I may be
Myself with yesterday's seven thousand years."

"You must go down to dinner, little one," he said, after a silence, in which Gigi had sat watching him with big, solemn eyes. "If any one asks why I don't come, say I have a bad headache, and shall rest till it is time to go to the theatre."

The hours passed by and Gigi did not return. Carlo imagined that Domenica Borelli had kept him, and was grateful to her. The clock struck seven; he prayed in brief, disconnected sentences that he might be able to get through his work, that no evil might befall Anita, that he might judge rightly as to what could be done.

Again, with a quickness which startled him, the quarter was chimed; he tried to think of Figaro, sang a snatch or two of "Zitti, Zitti," and felt that he would have given anything to be able to escape from that night's performance.

Should he even now follow Domenica's suggestion and send for a doctor? There was yet time. For an instant the thought of the intense relief to himself was almost more than he could withstand. But then, on the other hand, he argued, people who had never been ill were apt to think themselves dying when there was nothing serious the matter with them, and, if he gave up tamely now, Comerio would certainly put himself forward to fill the vacancy in the company. No; he must fight for his post to the last gasp. The half-hour struck as he formed his final resolution, and with an effort he flung back the rugs and coats which were heaped up on the bed, staggered to his feet, lit the gas, and, standing before the mirror, threw himself into one of Figaro's characteristic attitudes, and sang a bar or two of "*Largo al factotum.*"

"Passable, if I can only hold out," he thought to himself. "And, after all, I'm not the first man who has made merry, and sung, and paced the stage, with aching bones. Was it Grimaldi or Liston who made the people laugh till they cried while he was bearing torments?"

He made his way to the sitting-room and looked in to see if Sardoni was there, but heard that he had already started. Merlino joined him in a grumbling humour; Gigi trotted up to say good-night; and then, feeling like one in a bad dream, he found himself walk-

ing through the street among jostling passengers, and getting a sort of confused vision of the bad faces which always make their appearance in a town where races are being held. The distance between the Royal Hotel and the theatre was quite short, but it seemed to him that night almost endless; it was only by a great effort that he kept up with Merlino, and when he reached his dressing-room he felt as if he could not have stood another minute.

"You are ill, Signore?" said Sebastiano, the dresser, with anxiety.

"It's all right, I will rest a minute," he replied, breathlessly. "Where is Signor Sardoni?"

"In the green-room, Signore; he dressed earlier than usual. Let me call him."

"No, no," said Carlo, quickly. "I am better alone."

And so perhaps he was, yet Sardoni's defection pained him—his friend had studiously avoided him the whole day. The dresser proposed all sorts of remedies, and Carlo patiently endured the well-meaning chatter till he was thoroughly equipped in his Spanish costume and had been duly "made up;" then he begged that no one might disturb him till the very last moment, and sat crouched up by the little fire, hearing in the distance the familiar sounds of the overture and the succeeding choruses. At last his hour came.

"Quite time, Signore," said Sebastiano, rapping on the door. He threw it open and walked slowly along the winding passages, arriving at the wings just in time to encounter the chorus as they came off the stage. Some rumour as to his illness had got abroad, and many good wishes and inquiries were made in the quick,

silent Italian fashion from his friends among the chorus singers. With very few exceptions he was extremely popular in the Company, and much sympathy was felt for him when it became apparent that he was far more fit to be in bed than at the theatre. An attendant handed him a guitar, he heard the orchestra begin the introduction to his song, and his thoughts flew back from this miserable present to the sunny past. He remembered how on his last day of unalloyed happiness he had sung this very song in Piale's room in the Strada Mont' Oliveto, and how the old Maestro had been in despair over his refusal to go on the stage.

"Thank Heaven he is not here to-night to be tortured by my bad performance!" was his last reflection as he drew himself together and walked on to the stage. The house was full, but by this time he had become rather discerning in the matter of audiences, and perceived at once that it had a larger proportion than on the previous night of the rowdy element, introduced into Ashborough by the races. He hardly knew whether to be relieved or vexed at seeing Mr. Britton and his son in the stalls, and, indeed, was able to spare little time to think of them, since he had to devote all his powers to conquering the agony of nervousness which had overwhelmed him. In vain he struggled to feel himself Figaro, his head swam, every bone in his body seemed to assert itself aching as though protesting that it belonged to one, Donati, who ought to have been in his bed at that moment, and not at all to the blithe, merry barber of Seville.

"Courage!" he said to himself. "If I can't get into

my character I'll at least walk through the part like a man, for Nita's sake!"

He set to work manfully, fully conscious that the conductor was eyeing him with fear and trembling, and anticipating some dire mishap. Still he struggled on, exerting himself to the utmost and trying to disregard the evident symptoms of disappointment which began to be manifest in the audience. He would not be influenced by them, though he was too keenly sensitive not to perceive the sort of wave of impatience and disapproval which passed over the faces of the listening crowd. Endless seemed the song! At each brief interval it seemed to him more impossible that he should ever get through it safely, and the mockery of the oft-repeated words, "*Ah! che bel vivere, che bel piacere!*" made matters still worse. At length the end drew near; with relief at the prospect, and with a desperate effort, he dashed off into the final and more florid repetitions of "*Ah, bravo Figaro!*" not without, even at that moment, a humorous perception of the effect such words from such a singer must produce on the hearers. "Were I there instead of here I should laugh till I cried," he reflected.

But it was almost over; he had survived the last long florid passage; there remained only four more notes. Exhausted, strung up to the very highest pitch of endurance, he tried to take the quick breath which was indispensable at that moment, but to draw it seemed impossible. He felt a sharp stab of pain as though a knife had been suddenly plunged in his side, yet the fatal white stick in Marioni's hand was raised, and with a last effort he forced himself to attack the high G.

What followed was to him ever after a sort of nightmare recollection. His voice failed utterly, and the high note, which should have been the climax of the song, broke into a discordant sound that only ceased to ring in his ears when overpowered by a storm of hissing. Such a hopeless failure was too much even for the patience and kindness of an English audience; hisses resounded on all sides. It was intolerable to have paid money to listen to such a miserable performance. The people were really angry, and would not be pacified.

For a moment or two Carlo stood looking at the angry, contemptuous faces with a sore-hearted sense of rejection and a keen, personal pain; then, seeing that they would no longer tolerate his presence he turned and walked away, but had only gone a few steps when a sudden remembrance that this defeat meant Comerio's probable triumph all at once overpowered him. The brightly lighted stage became black as night, the hisses were drowned by a rushing sound in his ears, and he fell back in a dead faint.

CHAPTER V.

BEHIND THE SCENES.

"When fog and failure o'er my being brood,
When life looks but a glimmering, marshy clod,
No fire out-flashing from the living God—
Then, then, to rest in faith were worthy victory!"

GEORGE MACDONALD.

SARDONI and Gomez, the Almaviva and Fiorello of the evening, were close at hand; Fiorello's part was practically over, but he had lingered near to see how

Donati would get on; when he saw him hissed off the stage a quiet smile stole over his dark features, but when he saw him fall back fainting he rubbed his hands with satisfaction, lingered but a moment to assure himself that the baritone lay motionless on the boards with his guitar beside him, then rushed as fast as he could to his dressing-room, flung on a thick brown ulster, caught up his hat, and hurried out of the theatre. Just outside the stage door he encountered Mr. Britton.

Now Mr. Britton was one of those kindly-looking, courteous men who are constantly stopped by passers-by in the street who have lost their way or who need any kind of help; Gomez instinctively turned to the pleasant-looking stranger.

"Pardon me, sir, but can you kindly tell me whether it is too late to send a telegram from the post-office?" he asked breathlessly.

"Oh no, you will find it open," said Mr. Britton, looking at him keenly.

Gomez thanked him, and ran at full speed down the narrow side street, and two minutes later he might have been seen standing at one of the little screened desks in the post-office, writing the following message in Italian:—

"Valentino ill; was hissed off stage to-night after '*Largo al factotum*.' Get paragraph put in one of London papers. See it to-morrow, and telegraph promptly to M., offering your services."

Meantime, Sardoni, far too much startled and shocked to pay the slightest attention to Gomez, rushed forward to his friend's help, flung the guitar out of the way, and raising Carlo's head, looked anxiously at his motion-

less features and pale lips, bitterly reproaching himself with the absorption in his own affairs which had made him blind to all else. Some sense of the contrast between that still form and the noisy confusion in the theatre first reminded him that the curious audience were watching this unexpected scene in the opera with eager eyes, and that, although the hisses had changed into a babel of question and surmise, Carlo was still exposed to every sort of ruthless criticism.

"Tell those idiots to let down the curtain," he said impatiently, as Marioni came hurrying forward, with his pale face and his bushy hair, looking more distraught than usual. The little conductor had flung down his baton and rushed from the orchestra the instant Carlo had fallen, but he was too excitable to think, as Sardoni thought, of practical matters. And yet it was a relief to him to be told to do something; he rushed away to give the order, and the next minute the curtain descended, veiling from the audience the crowd of actors and attendants which had gathered round poor Figaro. Mr. Britton who had been admitted at the stage door, was just in time to see Carlo borne into the green-room, and to follow with those who came after; he had heard so much of theatrical jealousies and quarrels, and had formed so low an opinion of theatrical people, that he was surprised to see the real sympathy and concern shown by every creature present.

"He has been ill this long time," said old Bauer; "but he had too much spirit to give in. Poor lad! those brutes ought to have seen how it was with him."

"Thought more of the bad bargain they had made

than of the singer's feelings," said Tannini, with his Yankee twang. "Well, 'tis the way of the world."

"Are you the doctor, sir?" asked Domenica Borelli, noticing Mr. Britton for the first time.

"No, I am a friend of Signor Donati's," he replied, glad to get speech of her, for he had noticed her quiet, womanly way of helping Sardoni and Merlino to do all that could be done for Carlo. "Shall I go and fetch a doctor?"

"I think it would be well——" she began. "But, stay, he is coming to himself; perhaps there is no need, and I know he would dislike having one called in."

"It's something new for everyone to be waiting on Valentino," said old Bauer. "A reversal of the usual order."

"Yes," said Mlle. Duroc; "he was the factotum of the troupe as well as of the opera. But, see, he is reviving."

And now Mr. Britton observed a marked but perhaps not wholly unnatural change in Merlino. While his brother-in-law had remained unconscious he had been as kindly and solicitous as any man could possibly be, but the moment Carlo came to himself, Merlino, relieved from the anxiety, remembered that as Impresario he was left in an awkward predicament.

Carlo opened his eyes for a moment, caught a confused vision of the faces round him, then closed them again for very weariness, and began to wonder, in a dreamy, but troubled way, where on earth he could be. He heard Merlino swearing and raving, and Tannini, and Bauer, and the local manager, and Marioni, all talking at once.

"*Santo Diavolo!*" cried Merlino. "Was ever Impresario worse treated? Here is the best house we have had for months, and what can I do but give back the money? There is no going on without a Figaro!"

"Had Donati told you this morning that he was ill you would have had time to telegraph for Comerio, who no doubt would be willing to help you in such an emergency," remarked Gomez, who had glided into the room.

Mr. Britton glanced sharply round at him, instantly recognising his face, though he was now once more in his Fiorello costume. He perceived at once that the man was no friend to Carlo, and wondered why he had rushed to the telegraph office.

"*Accidente!* why did you not do so?" said Merlino, turning upon his brother-in-law with a wrathful gesture. "I ask you now what am I to do? Is all this money to be lost?"

"You might telegraph to Comerio now and secure him for to-morrow, at any rate," suggested Gomez. "He could join us at Queenbury and take——"

"No such thing," interrupted Carlo, catching at Sardon's arm, and dragging himself up. "Give *Fra Diavolo* to-morrow, and that will give me a day's rest; and go quickly and say to the audience that I am unwell, but that, since the opera can't be continued without the leading part, I will do the best I can, if they'll put up with me."

There was a vigour and force in his tone which astonished every one; Merlino, with a look of relief, hurried away to pacify the audience; and, though the others had serious doubts whether Donati could pos-

sibly get through so trying a part, they would not side with Gomez, who began to remonstrate with him.

"I never saw anyone more afraid of being supplanted," said the Spaniard, vindictively. "For my part I call it mere obstinacy and conceit to attempt what it is clearly impossible for you to do."

"I calculate it doesn't much affect you, my friend," said Tannini, drily. "Your part is over for to-night, so just shut up, will you? If the rest of us who have to sing with Donati make no bones about it, why should you take upon yourself to grumble?"

Gomez turned away with a muttered curse, and Carlo looked gratefully at the American.

"I'll do my best not to put you out; I shall be glad for Merlino's sake and my own too if you and the audience will tolerate such a bad Figaro. Come to my room with me, will you, Jack?" then, as he caught sight of Mr. Britton, and received a hearty grip of the hand, "How good of you to come round! I had no idea you were here. I was so ashamed to give you such a miserable rendering of that song."

Mr. Britton was not sorry to leave the green-room and to go with Carlo and Sardoni into one of the little dressing-rooms. There were not many chairs to be had, and Carlo, without ceremony, dropped into the one drawn close to the tiny fire-place, unable to hide any longer the severe pain he was suffering, though when questioned he made light of it.

"You surely ought not to sing," said Mr. Britton.

"It won't do my voice any harm if I can only get breath enough," he replied. "And the pain isn't continuous, only just a sharp stab in the side every now and then."

"Dear old fellow, it was madness of you to come at all," said Sardoni. "You must give in; you must put up with Comerio's return; there is no help for it."

Carlo leant his head on his hand and was silent, as if struggling with himself; both speakers seemed to have forgotten Mr. Britton's presence.

"It's no good looking ahead," said Carlo, after a pause. "Of course it will be all right. But don't argue now, Jack; I've got to sing if they will have me, and there's an end of it."

As he spoke there was a knock at the door, and Merlino entered.

"I think they will hear you," he said. "They are in a bad temper, but they see we are doing all that can be done, and they'll hardly hiss you off again. They are very easily pacified these English audiences."

Carlo glanced at Mr. Britton with the strangest mixture of pain and laughter in his dark, shining eyes. The contented look of the Impresario as he painted the sort of reception which probably awaited him tickled his fancy.

"A glass of porter before you go on?" said Bauer, pressing it upon him.

"Try this raw egg, signore," said his dresser, eagerly.

"Or a troche," suggested Sardoni.

"Or a Stolberg," said Merlino, producing a little box full of dark-looking lozenges.

With a smile and a gesture he thanked them, and made every one laugh by quoting Figaro's words, "*Oh, che vita! che vita! oh, che mestiere!*"

"Was there ever such a fellow?" said Bauer. "I

verily believe he would make us laugh if he were on his death-bed."

"If the audience do but realise his courage he will be well received," said Mr. Britton, who was standing at the wings beside the old German singer. "There is nothing that pleases the British public like pluck."

In truth, to face again the audience which had so lately refused to hear him was no very pleasant task to Carlo, but then he had a habit of grasping the nettles of life which stood him in good stead. More sensitive than most men, he had turned his weakness into strength by resolutely refusing to make the smallest concession to it, and he was able even with overwrought nerves and failing physical powers to endure with composure the trying ordeal. It was as Merlino had said, the audience kindly consented to put up with him; they allowed him to appear without a single hiss. Indeed, the chilling silence was broken by five or six resounding claps from the third row of stalls.

"That is Francesca's cousin," he thought to himself, and he felt glad to have one friendly face among the hundreds of coldly critical ones. He was glad, too, to have such friends as Domenica Borelli and Sardoni to sing with that night, and was cheered by Mr. Britton's kindness. If only he could get through his work he thought that, spite of the dark future, he should feel perfectly happy. But that was the great question. All thought he had attempted what was physically impossible, and he shrank in horror from making another exhibition of himself on the stage. "If I do faint again," he reflected, "I hope I shall do it decently in my dressing-room."

By sheer force of will he got through the long weary duet with Sardoni, but it left him so worn out with pain that he could hardly stand. He got off the stage somehow, and the moment they were out of sight Sardoni took him by the arm and half dragged him to his room, where, with an irrepressible groan, he threw himself on the floor beside the fire, seeming to find a sort of relief in thrusting the guitar under his arm so that he actually lay upon it.

"Pleurisy," thought Mr. Britton, who had followed to see if he could be of any use; but Carlo was evidently in such pain that he did not like to talk to him, so he turned instead to Sardoni, to whom he had taken a great fancy, and who, to make up for his past selfishness, was devoting himself to his friend in a way that pleased the Englishman. They discussed all possible means of helping him, and Sardoni going out to fetch some restorative brought back word that Mlle. Borelli had been encored in her cavatina, which could give Carlo a longer space to recover his strength.

"Are you sure I am not in your way here?" asked Mr. Britton. "I don't feel as if I could sit in the audience not knowing how our friend is getting on."

Sardoni, who realised that the stranger must be some relation to Francesca Britton, warmly assured him that he was the greatest possible help; and Carlo, though too much exhausted to speak an unnecessary word, gave him a glance which conveyed more than many sentences.

All too soon came the unwelcome call-boy. Again Carlo braced himself up for the effort, and Sardoni and

Mr. Britton watched him anxiously through his scene with Rosina.

"He is on the stage a great deal after this," explained Sardoni, "but the most trying part is over for him as far as singing goes when he is once through this scene."

"Will he get through, do you think?"

"If he does it will be by the skin of his teeth," said Sardoni. "But, like the *Barbiere* himself, he is a '*Bravo giovanotto*.' No other man whom I know would do it, but he perhaps may."

"Ah, I thought so!" he exclaimed, as the duet over, the baritone beat a hasty retreat, and on reaching the shelter of the wings would have fallen had he not promptly caught him. "It is as I said, by the skin of his teeth."

They carried him back to his room, but had barely restored him to life when Sardoni was obliged to go on the stage again, leaving him alone with Mr. Britton.

It was the strangest evening the Englishman had ever spent, as he sat in the dismal little dressing-room, with its bare floor and whitewashed walls, its confusion of stage dresses and the garments of prosaic life. Some one had brought in two or three cushions from the green-room, and as soon as Carlo had recovered his senses they had laid him on these upon his left side, the position which seemed to give him the greatest ease. The firelight played on his face, and Mr. Britton, as he watched him, found his thoughts wandering back to the time when he had first met him with Francesca outside the English church at Naples. He recalled the strange, sad smile which had passed over the young

Italian's face when he congratulated him on his betrothal, and he felt irresistibly drawn to a man who could deliberately choose a career so self-denying, so little likely to be understood.

He was startled to find that his thoughts of Francesca must have affected his companion.

"We may not be alone again," said Carlo, turning his face towards him. "If anything should happen to me, will you promise to give this to Francesca"—he indicated their betrothal ring—"and tell her how good everyone was to me?"

Mr. Britton felt a choking sensation in his throat, but he promised, and then, partly to break the uncomfortable silence, remarked that he had heard from Casa Bella that morning.

"They are well?" asked Carlo.

"Quite well. Francesca comes to England in June."

The next moment he regretted his words, for they seemed to give the finishing touch to Carlo's suffering. He turned abruptly away, and, though his face was hidden, Mr. Britton could see that he was struggling to suppress a tempest of passionate emotion. So little do people understand each other, that it had never occurred to the Englishman, with all his kindheartedness, to picture to himself the torture of a lover who knows that his love will be close at hand, yet that he is to be denied even a sight of her. But that silent, bitter struggle taught him much, and once more set his kind heart to weave plans for helping the course of true love to run smooth.

Before anything more had passed, the call-boy rapped at the door, and Mr. Britton in dismay turned

to see what his companion would do. He had yet to learn that Italian storms, if violent, are brief, and that an Italian nature, if it has strong emotions, has also a wonderful self-mastery upon which it can fall back in time of need. Carlo rose promptly, rearranged his disordered costume in a business-like fashion, and smoothed his hair; then, fearing that Mr. Britton might regret the words which had escaped him, said in the manner which won him so many friends, "Do you mind coming with me to the wings? I like to feel that you are there."

And before the Englishman had recovered from his surprise at this unlooked-for composure, Figaro was in the thick of the noisy group on the stage, acting better than he had done all the evening, and endeavouring to play the part of peacemaker, and to put an end to the altercation.

Mr. Britton could hardly believe as he watched the lithe, active figure, now here, now there, that a few minutes ago he had seen the same man lying in the extremity of mental and bodily pain; and when once more in the interval between the acts he and Sardoni had to restore the Italian to his senses, he could no longer keep his astonishment to himself.

"What in the world can our friend be made of?" he exclaimed. "I should not have thought it possible for a man of his temperament to persevere in the teeth of such difficulties."

"I suppose pluck and goodness generally do go together," said Sardoni; "and though you may be Donati's friend, no one who is not in this Company can have

much idea of what he really is. He's out and out the best fellow I ever came across."

"He seems very much liked by most of the Company."

"Yes, and with good reason. They all apply to him one of their expressive Italian sayings—'Good as a piece of bread'—a description which would not hold for the rest of us."

"He is coming to himself," said Mr. Britton, and there was silence in the room, broken at last by Carlo's voice.

"How much more, Jack?" he asked, faintly.

"The second act," said Sardoni; "three more scenes for you."

He closed his eyes again, and they noticed that as the evening advanced he became less and less willing to speak an unnecessary word.

The opera, which had seemed to all the singers interminable, did at length end, and with it the last remains of Carlo's strength. More dead than alive he was carried to Mr. Britton's brougham, which had been ordered round to the stage door, and leaving the kindly Englishman to see him safely home, Sardoni hurried off in search of a doctor.

Carlo had fancied that if only he could get through the opera he should be perfectly happy, but when his work was really done he was suffering too acutely to be able to bestow a thought on the future or on Anita. Too faint to speak, he allowed Mr. Britton to help him up to his room, never troubling himself to consider the impression that No. 62 would make on the rich ship-builder. The miserable little place was to him now a

haven of rest, and there was deep relief in the consciousness that he could now suffer in peace, that no call-boy would rap at this door, that there was no longer the horrible necessity of acting and singing before a critical audience. But to Mr. Britton that dismal little attic was the climax of the evening. Its total lack of comfort appalled him, and when he had left the patient in the care of Sardoni and the doctor he drove home, vowing that Carlo should be moved to Merlebank the very next day.

CHAPTER VI.

"HIGH FAILURE."

"We are like soldiers in a vast, widely-extended battlefield (wrapped in obscurity), of which we know not the phases, of which we seem utterly powerless to control the issues; but we are responsible for our own part—whatever goes on elsewhere, let us not fail in that. The changes of the world, which men think they are bringing about, are in the hands of God. With Him, when we have done our duty, let us leave them."—DEAN CHURCH.

CLARE was much concerned when she heard the bad news which Mr. Britton and Harry brought home that evening.

"You didn't wait to hear the doctor's verdict?" she asked, when the bare outline of the story had been given her.

"No, it was so late, and I thought I should only have been in the way; but I fear there's not the least doubt the poor fellow is in for pleurisy."

"It was awful to see him towards the end," said Harry. "Leaning up against the woodwork when he

had to be on the stage with nothing actually to sing or do, and every now and then, when he was singing, suddenly folding his arms—so—as if the pain was almost unbearable."

"What do you think, Miss Claremont—if we had one of the St. John's nurses down, could we manage to look after him all right here?" said Mr. Britton.

Clare was delighted at the proposal, for she had always been fond of Carlo. She did not understand all Mr. Britton's reasons for taking an interest in the young Italian, but his kindness and hospitality did not at all surprise her, because he was a man who was for ever going out of his way to help other people, and Kate, who was housekeeper, used sometimes to protest that really Merlebank might as well call itself what it was in fact—a sanatorium for his friends and acquaintances.

"There is no doubt he must be moved from his present quarters," said Mr. Britton. "I never saw such a room,—the little child sleeping in a portmanteau, a miserable truckle-bed, a sloping skylight through which you could see the stars—such a room as no servant of mine should sleep in."

So the plans for Carlo's reception at Merlebank were discussed, and the next morning Mr. Britton drove in to the Royal Hotel to see what sort of a night the Italian had passed. At the entrance he encountered the doctor.

"How is your patient to-day, Kavanagh!" he asked.

"Very bad, poor fellow—must be moved at once to the hospital."

"Nonsense, he is a friend of mine; I want him brought to Merlebank. You'll give leave for that, I hope?"

"Oh, certainly, if you really want to have him, but I must warn you that he is likely to be laid up for some time,—acute pleurisy, and we shall do well if we ward off complications."

"Poor fellow! I thought he was in for it last night. He is an old family friend of ours, and I shall be particularly glad to help him if I can. How about a nurse? Shall I telegraph for one?"

"I can see to that, if you like," said the doctor. "His sister seems a most empty-headed creature, and the sooner he is away from her the better."

Mr. Britton was just wondering whether he had better ask to see Sardoni, when he caught sight of Gigi strolling listlessly down the passage.

"How is your uncle, little man?" he asked. "Can I see him?"

"He's ill," said Gigi, mournfully, and without further remark he slipped his little brown hand into Mr. Britton's and led the way to No. 62. The door was open, and a babel of Italian could be heard—four people all talking at once.

Mr. Britton half hesitated, but the child led him on. The next moment a curious scene met his gaze. In the dismal little attic, which by daylight looked even more forlorn and comfortless, a stormy discussion was being carried on. The Impresario, who was evidently in the worst of tempers, held in his hand an open telegram; Gomez, with a sarcastic smile on his usually grave face, stood playing the part of general irritant *con amore*; Madame Merlino and Sardoni seemed to be having a battle-royal; and the sick man lay in the midst of the strife of tongues evidently in great pain, but listening

with strained anxiety to all that passed. Mr. Britton heard an impatient, "Can't you see how bad this is for him?" from Sardoni, and disconnected remarks about "Comerio's coming," which gave him the clue to the matter which was being discussed.

He waited at the door, for Donati was far too much absorbed in what was going on to notice him, and indeed had to concentrate all his faculties on the effort to meet this crisis. That which he had feared had come to pass: Comerio had telegraphed to offer his services; and all through the weary night Carlo had been trying to solve the difficult problem whether, should this happen, it was his duty to explain all to Merlino or not. Superficial people are fond of saying that the right is always clear. Carlo did not find it so. It was only after hours of mental struggle and suffering that he at length arrived at the conclusion that, all things considered, he was not justified in arousing Merlino's suspicion. He went so far, however, as to propose another alternative.

"Look," he said, speaking with difficulty, "Paul Cremer's English Opera Company might very possibly have a spare baritone. Telegraph and see, and I will defray the expenses of anyone they can send."

He broke off to cough—the effort had cost him hideous pain, and Mr. Britton could see that great drops of perspiration stood on his brow.

"*Accidente!* It only shows how little you know of such things," said Merlino, angrily. "We are secure of Comerio, and had far better have him than some stranger. I should have thought you were above such petty jealousy as that, Donati."

"Then will you reply to the telegram?" asked Gomez.

"I suppose I must," said Merlino, in his grumbling way. "It's a confounded nuisance."

And with muttered imprecations he left the room, evidently regarding Carlo's illness as a wilful injury and a personal insult.

Gomez having gained his object, followed the Impresario, and Mr. Britton drew near to the bed, and spoke to Sardoni, but Carlo lay with closed eyes, and took no notice of what was passing until he heard Nita get up from her chair beside him, and move towards the door. Then he started up with sudden energy.

"Nita," he exclaimed, "do not go yet—I want to speak to you!"

She turned back reluctantly, and at the same moment he became aware of Mr. Britton's presence.

"How kind of you to come!" he said. "Will you excuse me just for a minute?—I want to speak to my sister—there is not much time left."

"We will wait in the next room," said Sardoni, "if Madame Merlino will tell us when she leaves you."

Nita assented, and, still reluctantly, sat down again beside the bed. When they were alone, he turned towards her.

"I had hoped to tide over this time in England," he said, striving with all his might not to let the physical pain overmaster him. "It is hard to feel that, after all, I have perhaps only made your danger greater. You must forgive me for failing you like this, Nita!"

"Don't distress yourself—I know of no danger!" she replied, crushingly, and with an expressive motion

of her small, shapely head. There had been a time when she had told him a very different story, but he bore the set-down patiently and caught at the ray of hope.

"That is indeed, true? Then God be thanked! I can go content!"

She laughed—the most heartless little laugh conceivable.

"Perhaps we do not mean precisely the same thing by the word 'danger.' There is no danger that my husband will ill-treat me, because one who loves me better will be here as my protector."

"Nita!" he groaned.

"Now, listen to common-sense!" she said, with angry gesticulation. "Merlino and I are not happy together: Comerio and his wife are not happy together. Why are four people to live in misery because of a conventional law?"

"Because they have vowed to be true to each other through everything,—because the only hope of their leading pure, noble lives is destroyed when they shirk their duty, and give up trying to love each other,—because it is not a conventional law, but God's command!"

She laughed again.

"Bravo!" she exclaimed. "My Confessor himself could not have read me a more correct little homily. As far as the marriage laws are concerned, *mio caro*, you are quite curiously orthodox. As a matter of fact, though, I always find these little homilies are propounded by the unmarried. Strange, isn't it?"

"You'll break my heart if you talk like that!" he exclaimed.

"Nonsense! Hearts don't break so easily, I assure you. You will go back to Francesca Britton and be happy; Comerio and I, too, shall be happy; while as for Merlino, he will merely lose a valuable soprano and baritone whom he never deserved."

She had rattled on, paying no attention whatever to his suffering. He was now so much exhausted that it was physically impossible for him to speak more than two words.

"Our mother!" he faltered.

"Is in Paradise, and will be ready to pray for me when I am in purgatory!"

His next words were hardly audible.

"*Il Cristo!*" he gasped.

"My Confessor does not allow me to talk of religion with heretics," she replied, triumphantly.

He turned away, and lay so absolutely still that Nita became frightened; however, it was an excellent opportunity to escape, and she availed herself of it, glancing in for a moment at the next room where Sardoni and Mr. Britton had waited.

"He has done with me now," she said cheerfully, though all the time her conscience was pricking her.

Mr. Britton had seldom seen so pretty a woman for whom it was so difficult to get up any sort of regard. Without knowing why, he heartily disliked Nita.

"She does not seem particularly anxious about her brother," he remarked.

Sardoni gnashed his teeth.

"He has given up everything to help her, and she—little vixen—won't do the slightest thing to please him. Let us come back to him."

Mr. Britton was horrified to see the change that had come over Carlo. It was not merely that the bodily pain seemed to have increased so much, but that he was in such terrible distress. Sardoni, however, seemed to understand all, and Mr. Britton walked to the window and left the two friends together, though he could not avoid hearing, every now and then, a sentence or two.

"Failed—hopelessly!" were the only words that escaped Carlo, and Sardoni seemed to be cheering him, and denying that all was lost, promising his help, talking of letters, and speaking hopefully of the future. Some mention of the hospital brought Mr. Britton to the bedside.

"The doctor says you may be nursed at my house," he said, kindly. "I couldn't think of allowing you to go to the hospital,—Miss Claremont is longing to have you at Merlebank." And then, to silence the Italian's thanks, and doubts, and evident wavering, he bent down and whispered a few words in his ear: "For Francesca's sake you must not refuse me."

They were interrupted by a suppressed sobbing from the other side of the bed, and found that Gigi was sitting in a disconsolate little heap on the floor, crying as though his heart would break.

"Put him up here, Jack, by me," said Carlo. "What is it, Gigi? are you hurt?"

"Oh, don't go away from me!" sobbed the child. "Don't leave me so all alone."

"Let him come to Merlebank, too," said Mr. Britton, who was apt to make kind-hearted offers without at all consulting Kate or the household arrangements.

"You are very good, but he ought to be with his mother," said Carlo, after a minute's thought. It cost him much to send away the little fellow, but he knew that Anita had really begun to care for him, and hoped that the child might prove her greatest safeguard. Mr. Britton guessed as much, but of course there could be no explanation to Gigi himself to whom the refusal must have seemed barbarous. He sobbed pitifully.

"Look, *mio caro*, I love you dearly, and would like you to have this time in the country," said Carlo, drawing the child close to him; "but in some ways it is better not. Say, do you, too, love me a little bit?"

"Yes, yes," sobbed Gigi, clinging to him.

"Then, will you stay here to please me, and help the mother, and run errands for them all when you can, and write me long letters——" He broke off, unable to say another word.

"*Carino!*" said the child with a depth of love and tenderness in his tone. Then, as Sardoni told him how ill Carlo was, "I will be good—good," and choking back his tears he slid down from the bed and sat like a sorrowful little statue on the edge of his port-manteau.

Mr. Britton, anxious that no more time should be lost, hurried to his office to telephone to Merlebank for the landau, and in an hour's time he was back again to help in all the arrangements.

The patient seemed a little easier, both in mind and body, though apparently no one but Sardoni had seen him, and there was no change as to his substitute.

At the last moment Madame Merlino came to say good-bye to him, expressing very prettily her thanks to

Mr. Britton for saving her brother from the hospital; but she seemed particularly anxious not to be left alone with the invalid, and apparently no words passed between them. When they parted, however, he drew her face down to his and gave her a lingering kiss, and Mr. Britton noticed that as she raised her head her eyes were full of tears. What was the meaning of it all, he wondered? Had she, after all, a heart? Did Carlo's silence appeal to her when his words had failed? or was it that his manner had somehow conveyed a confidence and trust in her higher nature which had wakened it from long sleep?

There was not much time for reflection, for just then the doctor arrived to superintend the removal of the patient, and before long Mr. Britton had taken leave of the various members of Merlino's Company who had become known to him during this little episode, and was driving home with his new guest.

People seem to have a notion that to be ill means to be more or less free from temptation; that with physical weakness comes spiritual strength; and that if the sick are in some ways to be pitied, they are in other respects to be very much envied. As a matter of fact, however, this idea is cruelly false. No healthy-minded, active man ever found it easy to be laid aside—ever submitted without a fierce struggle to the humiliation of dependence and bodily weakness. Far from necessarily becoming saints during illness, the bravest and best of men often find it as much as they can do to be even decently patient, and know only too well the mental misery of the time—

"When the sensuous frame
Is rack'd with pangs that conquer trust."

The faith which had come to Carlo's help when he parted with Anita was not proof against the severe physical strain of the removal to Merlebank; his mind seemed incapable of hope, capable only of dwelling on the one horrible fear that Comerio's evil influence would prevail. Sleepless nights, and wearing anxiety, and severe bodily pain had made it almost impossible for him to see things in due proportion, and his artistic power of calling up before him graphic pictures of any subject that arrested his attention, became a torture almost unendurable.

The doctor and kind-hearted Mr. Britton had no idea of what was passing in the sick man's mind as they drove along the road between Ashborough and Merlebank, and when once he opened his eyes for a minute and they could not help seeing the look of grievous distress in them, they only thought of the bodily suffering, and said to him reassuringly, "It will soon be over." He could have smiled at the incongruity of the words had he not been down in the black depths where smiles can by no means come.

The carriage rumbled along with a dull, hollow, monotonous sound, and presently drew up at the great door at Merlebank; he caught a vision of Clare standing in the porch with two or three servants, but it was far less distinct than the mental picture from which he could not escape. Then the doctor half smothered him with wraps, and since to breathe was agony, he found himself resenting almost childishly the infliction of great shawls, which necessitated two breaths where one might have sufficed. Was he losing his self-control, he

wondered? It was clearly impossible for him to govern his thoughts,—was it also impossible to regulate his feelings? He prayed in a sort of blind, wretched despair; but in that state of blank depression nothing in heaven or earth seemed real to him but his own failure and that indelible mind-picture of Nita and Comerio. Dimly he felt his misery increased by the beauty and luxury of the room to which he was borne, and even by the kindness of his attendants. What did he in his misery want with outer comfort? "I have miserably failed," he thought to himself; "and now, I suppose, am going to die. I wish they had let me die in the hotel room! I wish they would let me alone!"

To turn from this haunting picture was now an effort to which he was wholly unequal; it exercised a deadly fascination over him, and when Clare spoke to him he grudged the interruption. Everyone seemed intent on relieving his physical pain; and it was not that which absorbed him: it was the far worse mental torture caused in great measure by the bodily suffering,—the torture of the conviction that all his efforts had been vain, and that evil would triumph. Without one ray of comfort he tossed through that weary day and night; sleep was out of the question, he became less and less capable of thinking rationally, and the doctor, on visiting him the next morning, looked very grave. Clare and Mr. Britton waited anxiously for his verdict.

"There is evidently something weighing on his mind," said Mr. Kavanagh, as he walked downstairs. "The local symptoms are subsiding, but I fear he is in a critical state. These southern temperaments are always hard to deal with—it is touch and go with them.

Keep him as quiet as possible, and I will look in again this evening."

Clare felt sad at heart as she kept watch while the nurse rested after her night's work; she could guess pretty accurately what it was that was weighing upon Carlo's mind, but how to comfort him she did not know. He lay quite still with closed eyes, his lips just parted that he might breathe with less effort; but the hand which lay outside the bed-clothes was tightly clenched, and the face bore an expression of silent misery, which was almost more than Clare could endure.

"Is the pain still so bad?" she asked at length.

He opened his eyes; they were so hopeless, so full of dumb distress, that it seemed to her they must be the eyes of some other man. She could not have believed that Carlo could ever have gone down to such depths of wretchedness.

"Much better, thank you," he answered, just above his breath; and Clare was thankful that his eyelids fell once more, for she could not keep back her tears. And so the hours passed on, and she knew that she was close to a man who was passing through the worst suffering that can be borne, and yet felt as powerless to reach him as if he had been a thousand miles away. At last, early in the afternoon, he seemed to make an effort to break the rigid quiet in which he had so long lain. She stood up to arrange his pillows afresh, and he took her hand in his and held it fast in a fevered grasp.

"If I could only sleep, Clare! if I could only sleep!" he exclaimed. They were the first words he had

voluntarily spoken, and she took them as a good sign; clearly he began to see that he must do all that he could to free himself from absorption in this one painful idea; even in his illness the duty of self-mastery lingered vaguely with him, spite of his failing powers.

"There is one sovereign remedy for sleeplessness," said Clare. "Let us see whether it will have any effect on you;" and taking a Bible from the shelf she began to read in a low, soft, slightly monotonous voice from the Book of Job. Whether it was the musical rhythm of the words, or the continuous sound, or the graphic picture set forth in that grand old poem, it would be hard to say; but for some reason the mental picture of Anita and Comerio gradually faded, the perception of his own pain passed away, he seemed to be living quite out of the nineteenth century—to be Job and not himself,—though it was, in fact, the personal perception of the truth of the poem which made its effect on him so powerful.

"'For the thing which I greatly feared is come upon me,' read Clare; 'and that which I was afraid of is come unto me. I was not in safety, neither had I rest, neither was I quiet, yet trouble came.'"

When Eliphaz the Temanite began to argue, Carlo felt himself sliding away into blissful drowsiness, and soon Clare perceived that the old charm had worked well and that he was sound asleep. He slept for some hours; when he opened his eyes the level rays of the setting sun were streaming through a window which was hidden from him by the bed-curtains and casting a vivid light on a picture just opposite to him. Now

Carlo was one of those who respond more easily to that which appeals to the artistic side of them than to that which appeals to the intellect. The deepest philosophical treatise, the most eloquent sermon, could not possibly have conveyed to him all that was conveyed by that well-known picture of the thorn-crowned Shepherd bearing through the wilderness the sheep that had gone astray. "*FINCHÈ l'abbia trovata!*" urged a voice in his heart: "UNTIL he find it!" It seemed to him that he had never till that minute realised the eternal constancy of the Good Shepherd, never taken in the truth that while men strive, and fail, and faint by the way, the work they have tried to do does not fail, but is eternally carried on in ways unknown to them. He saw that for the present all he could do was to suffer patiently; but the picture of Nita and Comerio, though it did its best to rise again in his mind, had lost its power of torture; he could always efface it almost instantly with this other picture of the tireless and persistent Shepherd, who in the end must inevitably win back His own, spite of false hirelings, and ravening wolves, and horrors of the wilderness. One glance into his eyes showed Clare that he was himself again, and the doctor, too, on his second visit, was surprised and pleased to find what a favourable turn his patient had taken. The alarming prostration had passed: that terrible depression which seems incapable of wishing to live or of making any effort to recover had given place to a strong desire for health. Though speaking was still an effort to him he asked two or three eager questions.

"Shall I get better, do you think?"

"Oh, there is not a doubt of it, if you go on as well as you have begun," said the doctor.

"Will my voice be injured?"

"There is no reason that it should not be as good as ever when you recover your strength."

"How soon could I possibly be fit to sing in public again?"

The doctor liked his spirit, and answered with a smile, "This day nine weeks, if you have no relapse. But don't excite yourself about it, and don't talk too much. What you want now is perfect rest of mind and body."

"One word more," broke in Carlo. "Is there anything I can do to get well sooner?"

"You can help me very materially by obedience to orders, and by keeping yourself quiet. All anxiety and excitement will retard your recovery. This attack of pleurisy is the best thing that could have happened to you, for you are altogether overworked and overstrained, and you must have rest. In these hurrying days people seem to have forgotten how to rest, that's the worst of it. If you'll only go on as you have begun this afternoon though, I shall be quite satisfied with you."

As Sardoni had once remarked, however, Carlo was in some respects "old-fashioned," and the doctor found that he had not forgotten even in his overstrained, nineteenth-century life the secret of rest; that he was fast learning what Thomas à Kempis deemed the work of a perfect man, "To pass through many cares, as it were without care; not with the indifference of a sluggard, but with that privilege of a mind at liberty."

CHAPTER VII.

A RESTORATION.

"Some say that the age of chivalry is past. The age of chivalry is never past as long as there is a wrong left unredressed on earth, and a man or woman left to say, 'I will redress that wrong, or spend my life in the attempt.' The age of chivalry is never past as long as men have faith enough in God to say, 'God will help me to redress that wrong; or if not me, surely He will help those that come after me. For His eternal will is to overcome evil with good.'"—CHARLES KINGSLEY.

KATE BRITTON was an indefatigable worker; parish work was her delight, and to her mind the luckless wight who did not go district-visiting, who was not an ardent teetotaler, who could not show a well-ordered Sunday-school class as the visible fruits of persevering work, hardly deserved toleration. Like all workers who are worth much she was full of enthusiasm, and would have been greatly missed in the village; but she was "ill to live with," because she had not yet learnt to see things from any point of view but her own, and had an overweening idea of her own importance. Carlo Donati was just now much on her mind; she had a feeling that he must have been brought to Merlebank for some special purpose; and as it was Kate's way to think always of the impression she might make on others, rather than of the impressions she might receive from them, she began to consider how she could bring her influence to bear on the Italian, and her enthusiasm was roused by an idea which came to her one day as she mused over his life. What a glorious thing it would be if she could convince him that he was leading

a life unworthy of a true man, and induce him to give up his profession!

With this in view, Kate put up with the infliction of the invalid's presence, and when in a fortnight's time he was well enough to spend most of the day in the morning-room, which adjoined his bed-room, she was really glad to have an opportunity for beginning her operations. As a rule she cordially disliked young men, and the one thorn in the otherwise perfect bliss of her parish-work was the inevitable curate; in her fear that she might be supposed to make her work an excuse for flirtation, she ran to the opposite extreme, openly avowed herself as a man-hater, and snubbed the entire biennial succession of deacons, who were ordained to the title of the quiet little country parish, but at the close of their two years' novitiate invariably passed on to larger spheres of work.

The morning-room was a bright, sunny, cheerful room, facing south, and Carlo enjoyed his change of quarters very much; he was glad to see Kate, too, for she interested him, and he delighted in tracing the slight likeness to Francesca which he had noticed when he first came to Merlebank. Kate, who was inordinately self-conscious, quickly perceived that his eyes followed her as she moved about the room arranging flowers in the vases, and she felt provoked, for it would be so horribly like a story-book if the invalid were to fall in love with her; yet she could not snub him as she snubbed the curate, because she wanted to influence him for his good, and longed for the honour and glory of persuading him to quit the stage. Reflecting that this was the Monday in Holy-Week, she thought she

would supply him with suitable literature—at any rate the offer of books would make a good opening for conversation. So she began boldly, yet with an effort that surprised her; somehow, although she had astonishing theories as to the universal depravity of young men, she had an undefined consciousness that Carlo Donati was not so immeasurably beneath her as the curates and the men to be met with at dances and tennis-parties. This perception did not please her.

“Clare said your things had been put in here,” she began; “but I don’t see anything but music, not books at all.”

“I don’t think I have any,” said Carlo: “I am not much of a reader.”

Kate felt dismayed, she could hardly conceive that any one could get on in life without her particular little library of good books. It was a slight relief to her to discover that among the pile of operas, wedged in between *Masaniello* and *Semiramide*, were a shabby, little Italian Testament and a very minute English Prayer-book.

Carlo on seeing this last gave a quick exclamation.

“Did I leave that out? Will you give it me, please?”

“And even this is not yours, but Francesca’s!” she said, laughing, as accidentally she dropped the book and noticed her cousin’s name on the flyleaf.

He coloured.

“She lent it to me the first time I went to the English church, and since then I have always had it,” he explained.

"It is dreadful print," said Kate, in her matter-of-fact way. "You had better let me lend you a clearer one."

But Carlo held out his hand for it, and his fingers closed over it jealously.

"It will do very nicely," he said. "I don't suppose I shall read it."

Which illogical statement would possibly have roused Kate's suspicion had she not been racking her brain for the devotional books most appropriate to his case.

She went across to her own particular bookshelf, and, to do her justice, chose out a few books really worth reading; eschewed a *Treasury of Devotion* as likely to be uncongenial to one of Carlo's turn of mind, and returned bearing *The Christian Year*, Taylor's *Holy Living and Dying*, and a book of meditations for Holy-Week, of which she was fond. He thanked her, but when later in the morning she saw him again, she found to her great disgust, that he was poring over *Les Huguenots*, and that her books were pushed aside.

"You didn't like them?" she said, with a touch of disappointment in her tone.

"I'm afraid I didn't read much," he said, apologetically; "you see to have this music within reach was more than I could resist. We have not yet done *Les Huguenots*, but we shall rehearse it in the summer, and give it in America this autumn. Do you know it well?"

"I have never heard an opera in my life," said Kate, feeling annoyed at his astonishment. "Do you really mean to go back to such a life? It must surely be very bad for you."

"But you see the doctor quite gives me hope of being as strong as ever again," replied Carlo, thinking she must refer to his health.

"I didn't mean that," replied Kate; "I meant it must surely be a very bad life in other ways."

"It is very much like other lives, I fancy; it is what you like to make it," he replied, quietly. He did not feel that he could very well enter into a discussion with a young girl on the special temptations of stage-life, and there was a silence.

"But surely all the applause and praise must be very trying?" said Kate.

"Applause always makes me think of a *méringue*," said Carlo, laughing a little; "sweet and evanescent, and leaves you longing for more. I don't deny that it is a great pleasure, and a great help, but I think it is a very innocent and legitimate pleasure."

"It must surely make you very vain?"

"Well, I hope not," said Carlo, smiling. "Of course, every artist has to be careful not to get into the way of thinking that his powers are merits instead of gifts. Years ago I heard Togni play at Naples, and you know when our people applaud they applaud tremendously; I shall never forget the deafening outburst; but it seemed to me like a great thanksgiving to God who had given such power to men. It was not Togni we applauded, it was the wonderful beauty and power which he had unfolded for us."

"But clearly," said Kate, "the life must be full of excitement. Surely your constant craving to get back to it again shows how engrossing and dangerous it must be."

He could not explain to her that it was no anxiety for applause which made him so eager to be back once more in Merlino's troupe, so he turned the conversation, and Kate naturally concluded that her remark had struck home. She despised him for evading the subject, but noticing that he looked tired, offered to read to him.

He seemed relieved at the proposal, and opening the *Christian Year*, asked her to read over again something which had taken his fancy.

"Exactly like his perverseness to choose the Tuesday in Whitsun-Week on the Monday in Holy-Week," she reflected, knowing nothing of his Whitsuntide associations. Moreover, the poem was the last one she would have expected him to like; it seemed a mockery to her that a man who was "fooling away his life on the stage" should be struck with the lines,

"And wheresoe'er on earth's wide field
Ye lift for Him the red-cross shield,
Be this your song, your joy and pride—
'Our Champion went before and died.'"

It had never occurred to her as a possibility that an operatic singer could appreciate sentiments of that sort. And she would have been scandalised and dismayed could she have known of the unconscious, matter-of-fact way in which Carlo would go from the altar to the theatre, or, if it suited him better as to time, from the theatre to the altar.

Very much perplexed as to the Italian's character, she walked that afternoon down to the village, but had scarcely left the grounds when she encountered the Vicar.

"I was just coming to your house," he remarked. "I hear you have a young Italian staying with you, and was coming to inquire after him. Is he better?"

"Oh, he is much better, thank you," said Kate. "I wish you would go to see him, for perhaps you who feel so strongly about such matters would be able to persuade him to leave the stage. I can't understand him at all; he seems quite wrapped up in his profession, and it is sad to think of a really good man wasting his life in work of that sort."

"I shall be very happy to see him," said the Vicar; "it will be quite a treat to me to talk Italian again!" And without more delay he made his way to the house, smiling to himself a little at Kate Britton's eagerness to influence all she came across, and rather pleased at the prospect of a new acquaintance in his small and not very interesting parish. He had preached only a little while ago against theatres, and it was satisfactory to be brought face to face in this way with a veritable member of the profession.

Having received a message that Signor Donati would be very glad to see him, the Vicar followed the servant upstairs to the morning-room, where he found the invalid on a couch drawn close to the fire. He was surprised at his fluent English; his accent, too, was perfect, and it was only by a very slight peculiarity in the intonation, and every now and then by some unusual little bit of phraseology, that he betrayed his foreign birth. His face, however, was unmistakably Italian, and, though he was evidently weak and tired, the Vicar thought him looking much less ill than might have been expected after so serious an attack. The formal greet-

ings were only just over when Carlo, having thoroughly studied the strong, intellectual face of his visitor—his calm, deep-set eyes, and the sort of general air of “iron-grey” which characterised him—exclaimed, with an excitement which surprised the Vicar,—

“I believe, sir—indeed, I am quite sure—that we have met before!”

Now, the Vicar had at that moment been thinking of his sermon at St. Cyprian’s, and admitting to himself that this actor, at any rate, did not at all fit-in with his preconceived notion of the members of the “unhallowed calling,” so, naturally enough, he thought that Carlo must refer to this occasion.

“Can you have been in the congregation at St. Cyprian’s when I preached there the other day!” he exclaimed. “I little thought I was addressing any one connected with the stage.”

“Ah! was it indeed you who preached that sermon?” said Carlo, quickly. “Yes, I was there with my friend Sardoni, the tenor of the Company; but we were quite at the back of the Church, and could not even see the pulpit. Was it indeed you who preached? That is one of the oddest coincidences I ever knew.”

“But when can you have met me before?” said the Vicar, looking puzzled. “Can I have met you in Italy and have forgotten?”

“Do you remember being in Naples last May, and going one afternoon into one of the *caffès* in the Piazza Plebiscito, and talking with your companion as to the improvement of the world in general in the nineteenth century?”

"With Stanley!—yes, yes, I remember it quite well!" said the Vicar.

"Do you remember how you said that men were not more willing to live the life of the Crucified? Well, I was sitting close by and heard you, and I owe you much, for those words haunted me continually, and—but this will, I fear, shock you—they helped me to choose my present profession."

The Vicar smiled a little. He could just perceive, though not so clearly as Carlo perceived, the irony of the situation. Mr. Britton had given him a hint as to Donati's motive in going on the stage, and had expressed a hope that the Vicar, if he had any opportunity, would do his best to dissuade him from returning to it, feeling convinced that Madame Merlino's case was hopeless. And now to be told that it was in some degree owing to words of his that the choice had been made was, to say the least of it, startling, while the knowledge that the Italian had been listening in St. Cyprian's to his tirade against theatres vexed him not a little. The Vicar was a kind-hearted man, though many people considered him hard; but, as a matter of fact, the idea of having denounced such a man as Donati to his face, and having probably pained him, caused him serious annoyance.

"I have always disapproved of the stage," he said after a brief pause. "But I am exceedingly sorry that you heard that sermon the other night, for it must have seemed hard and unjust to you, I am afraid."

"I will tell you quite candidly just how it was," said Carlo. "It did vex me, I must allow, but then I was beginning to feel ill and overdone, and had had rather.

a rough time of it through the week, and it seemed hard to lose the sense of fellowship which one counts on getting, at any rate, in Church. But what vexed me most of all, and perhaps made me exaggerate your denunciation, was that my friend Sardoni, who does not go-in much for church services, happened that night to have come with me."

"Did it do him harm, do you think?" asked the Vicar.

Carlo hesitated.

"He was very angry about it," he said, at length; "unreasonably angry, I thought. But he has a good deal to trouble him, and there were reasons which made any attack from the Church on our profession specially painful to him."

He broke off as the door opened, and looked with feverish eagerness towards the servant who entered with the afternoon letters. Just at this time he seemed to live in perpetual craving for post-time; for not only was he terribly anxious to hear from Sardoni how matters were going on in the Company, but he had always an undefined hope that some one at Merlebank would hear from Francesca, and that at least some fragments of the letter might be read or quoted in his presence. This afternoon there arrived the letter from Sardoni for which he had looked and waited so long.

"Will you excuse me just for one minute?" he said. "This is from my friend Sardoni, of whom we were just speaking. If you will allow me—I am ashamed to ask such a thing—but I am very anxious to see how things are going with them."

He opened the envelope, tossed it aside, and began

to read eagerly. Involuntarily the Vicar glanced at the handwriting of the direction. It was large and marked—a peculiar and thoroughly characteristic hand. The colour rose to his forehead—his lips trembled. He waited, partly to recover his self-control, partly to allow Carlo time to glance through the letter, then, with undisguised eagerness, he exclaimed—

“This friend of yours, Signor Donati,—what did you say he was called?”

“Sardoni; he is the *primo tenore* of our Company. Such a good-hearted fellow! I don’t know what I should do without him.”

“But that perhaps is an assumed name! What is his true name? Is he not an Englishman?”

“He is English, but he keeps entirely to his *nom de guerre*,” said Carlo.

“Even you, his friend, do not know his true name?”

“Yes, I do know it; but he does not wish it generally known. Have you any special reason for asking? Good heavens!” he exclaimed, as an idea suddenly occurred to him; “can it possibly be that which altered him so much after the sermon? Sir, I beg you to tell me your name! I have only heard you spoken of as the Vicar.”

“My name is John Postlethwayte,” said the Vicar, watching with anxiety indescribable the effect of his words on the Italian.

There was no mistaking the intense excitement which dawned in Carlo’s face.

“You saw and recognised this writing?” he asked, breathlessly, pointing to the envelope; then as the Vicar signed an assent, “Thank God, I have come across

you! I see there can be no doubt that you are his father!"

Tears started to the Englishman's eyes. Carlo observed this with relief. The Vicar did not seem nearly so hard and uncompromising as Sardoni had led him to expect.

"My son was here, then, in Ashborough!" he exclaimed—"was actually in the church that night, and never came near me! I have spent my life in looking for him!—have wandered all over the Continent in the hope of finding him once more!—and does he now avoid and shun me when we are in the same town?"

"It must have been that which made him feel the sermon so much," said Carlo. "He knew you disapproved of the stage; he was afraid you would not believe that he had turned over a new leaf—he told me that long ago; and then, of course, when he heard you speak so strongly against actors and their calling he would naturally be repulsed and disheartened!"

The Vicar paced the room in great distress. It was indescribably bitter to him to realise that his son should have happened to hear that one sermon, and to reflect that the whole course of his life might have been altered had his theme been of reconciliation and charity.

"But all will be well now," said Carlo; "for, if you have searched for him, then you must really care to be reconciled to him—and, indeed, he wishes your forgiveness. The very first day after we landed in England, he went straight to your old home, fully expecting to find you there. It was then he told me all about it, and gave me his true name. Poor Jack! I

shall never forget his misery when he found a stranger in your place."

"Did he go, indeed, to the old home?" said the Vicar, eagerly. "My poor boy, if only I had been there to meet him! But surely he could have found out in the village where I had gone to?"

"He did send me to make inquiries," said Carlo, "and the old sexton told me you were at Cleeving, in Mountshire. But when Jack found how, through his fault, your home had been broken up and your work spoiled, he said he could not write to you or seek you out. Indeed, I doubt if we shall ever get him here unless we take him altogether by surprise. He would say that he would not come back to be a disgrace to you in a new parish."

"Then I must go to him!" said the Vicar.

Carlo hesitated. He pictured to himself the sort of meeting that might take place in one of the second-rate hotels, or in the dingy lodgings which Merlino's Company frequented, where privacy was out of the question, and where Sardoni, because of his surroundings, would certainly not show to the greatest advantage. He thought of the gossip which would be set afloat in the Company, and realised how distasteful it would all be to his friend.

"If you don't mind," he said, "I think it would be much better if I wrote to him and begged him to come down and see me; I think I could write urgently enough to bring him, and on Good Friday there will of course be no opera, and it is possible that he might even be able to arrange to stay over Easter Monday. Will you mind just handing me that pocket-book, and I will see

where the Company will be? Ah, yes, I thought so; they will be at Worcester, and on the Saturday will be giving *Marta*. I have no doubt that Merlino will let Caffieri take Lionello in Jack's place; he did so once in the autumn."

Spite of his excitement and anxiety the Vicar could not but perceive that his visit was tiring the invalid.

"I am ashamed to have forgotten your illness in my own great joy," he said, rising to go. "I little thought what news awaited me when I came here."

"This is worth being ill for," said Carlo. "I shall write to Jack by the first post to-morrow."

Probably the doctor would highly have disapproved had he known of the little plot which was being worked out in his patient's room; but only Clare and Mr. Britton were taken into the secret, and in truth the excitement and hope acted like a sort of tonic, and Carlo forgot for a time his own anxieties in planning his various arrangements for that eventful Good Friday. Sardoni had written to say that he would come at half-past three in the afternoon, and Carlo awaited his arrival in some trepidation. Remembering the unpleasant sensation he had experienced at Piale's house of having been entrapped, he abandoned the rather stagey idea which had first suggested itself to him, of allowing Sardoni to be shown in upon his father without any preparation. Nevertheless, he was too thorough an Italian not to be dramatic, and the Vicar was glad enough to trust the management of all to one who really knew his son much better than he could pretend to do. He listened to the Italian's ideas with some surprise, but he did not call them in question. Sardoni might now be expected to

arrive at any minute, and the Vicar, waiting with Carlo in the morning-room, was enduring tortures of suspense and anxiety.

"When we hear him arrive," said Carlo, quietly, "I want you to go through that inner door into the next room; leave the door ajar. Then, when Jack comes, I will tell him the whole truth, and how I came across you, and how you recognised his writing. That being settled, I shall ask him to help me to my bedroom. When you hear us get up, then leave my room where you have waited by the other door, leading into the passage, and come back here. I know you are thinking me like a stage-manager, but, don't you see, this is the only means of getting me out of the way. You will now meet alone and unobserved; Jack will have been prepared, and will not feel that we have dealt unfairly by him; and yet he will in a sense be surprised when he goes back to find you there, because he will have been bracing up his mind to the idea of seeking you out at the Vicarage."

All these little considerations would never have occurred to Mr. Postlethwayte; he was dreadfully afraid that something would not work, that he should make a blunder and forget when to make his exit, or by what door. But Carlo seemed to have perfect confidence in his little plot; and when the supreme moment arrived, the Vicar, waiting in the inner room, began to feel confidence in the man who had planned all with such perfect appreciation of the feelings of others, and whose sole thought of himself had been how, when his work was over, he could best be got out of the way.

And now a brisk, familiar step was heard in the

passage, the maid-servant announced in the most prim and ordinary way, "Signor Sardoni," and the next moment Jack strode into the room. The Vicar bit his lip hard as he heard the hearty, cheerful voice which had been silent to him for so many years.

"Well, old fellow, how are you? Why, you are looking almost yourself again. This is a case of Mother Hubbard's dog; I thought I should find you ready to make your last will and testament, as you were so anxious to see me once more. I shall take back good news for the troupe; we are all longing for you back again, though Comerio tries hard to be civil, and to win golden opinions. And that reminds me, Val; I've just hit upon a way of turning an honest penny."

"What's that?" said Carlo, getting in a word with difficulty.

"Why, I mean to write a sensational article for one of the Reviews, on the Italian Character. The motto to be the old nursery rhyme, adapted,

'When they are good, they are very, very good,
And when they are bad they are horrid.'

That man is a fiend, his cunning and malice are beyond anything I ever knew."

"Presently I want you to tell me all," interposed Carlo, seizing at once on the momentary pause. "But, Jack, first of all, there is something I must tell you. What parish do you think this house is in?"

"Parish! How should I know?" said Sardoni.

"It is in the parish of Cleevering," said Carlo, quietly.

Sardoni sprang to his feet.

"Good God, Donati!—and did you bring me here

for that reason? Have I not told you that nothing will induce me to revive the old disgrace? Look here! that attack we heard in the church the other night on the stage—that was spoken by my father! Do you think, after that, he would care to have me coming home?"

"I know he would," said Carlo. "Don't be angry, Jack; just hear me quietly to the end. I did not betray you, but your father has found you out." He told him graphically just what had happened, then continued: "Do you think he was thinking of the 'disgrace' when he threw up everything to go and search for you on the Continent? Do you think he cares a rush for what people say when his first impulse was to go straight to Worcester and see you? Perhaps it would have been better, after all, if I had not suggested this other plan."

"No, no!" broke in Sardoni; "I could never have stood that. But yet, I doubt if I can do it, Val. It was hard enough last time with you. And alone! No, I can't do it! You'll never know what it is to an Englishman—the mere walking up to the house and ringing the bell!"

"But you would at least do as much as that for one who has tramped all over Europe for you?" said Carlo.

"It's not that," said Sardoni, brushing his hand impatiently across his eyes. "It's not that I mean! Upon my soul, Donati, I think you are too good to understand how it is with me."

Carlo replied only by one of his expressive gestures.

"Too tired to discuss the matter further, we will say. Give me an arm, will you, Jack? I will go to my room and rest, and will see you again later on."

"I forgot how ill you had been!" said Sardoni, with

compunction. "And now I have tired you, and thought only of my own affairs, like the brute that I am!"

He helped him into the adjoining room, and Carlo, conscious of much the same sensation about the heart as he had felt on the night of his first appearance in public, dismissed him.

"If you ring the bell in the next room," he remarked, "they'll show you to your room, or if you make up your mind to go to the vicarage, steer for the church tower, and you can't mistake the house, for they say there is none other near."

"I wish you were about, and could go there with me," said Sardoni, with a sigh.

"You are much better alone. I told you last time I should only have been in the way. Now for my *siesta. A rivederci!*"

Sardoni turned away slowly and with a sort of reluctance—almost as if he were already in imagination rehearsing that difficult return which Carlo had spoken of. To steer straight for the church tower! What a walk that would be!—what a fight would be involved in every step! He closed the door, and once more re-entered the morning-room. Was that Mr. Britton standing by the window? But at the sound of the shutting of the door the figure turned, and crossed the room in eager haste.

Sardoni's heart beat like a sledge hammer; the tears rushed to his eyes.

"Father!" he faltered. "Did you come?—are you here?"

And Carlo himself would have been satisfied could he have seen the manner of their meeting.

When they could speak, the Vicar replied to the incoherent question.

"It was your friend's doing! He thought this would be the best place."

"It is all his doing!" said Sardoni, in a choked voice.

There was a pause, broken at last by the father.

"Let us come home together!" he said.

And Carlo, lying tired-out in the next room, heard the door of the morning-room open, and knew that all was well, and pictured to himself how the two would walk together towards the house by the church, and how Sardoni would smile to himself when he found that there was no question as to ringing of bells, since the father would throw the door wide, and himself take him into the new home where even dark memories would not be allowed to enter and spoil the peace of their reconciliation.

But what passed he never actually knew, because there are things too sacred to be put into words—things which men learn to take on trust even with their closest friends.

Sardoni returned in the evening, and talked of Anita, and Comerio, and Gigi, and of the various vicissitudes of the Company in the last three weeks. But on Easter Eve, in the morning, when Carlo, like a true Neapolitan, desired to begin the Festa, the Vicar came true to his appointment, and with him came his son.

"You will have the necessary third without me," whispered Clare, thinking they would rather be alone.

"I will go."

"No," said Carlo. "I should like to have you both,

if you don't mind. Jack, this is my friend, Miss Claremont."

Clare welcomed him quietly, and the two friends just gripped each other's hands, and not another word passed between them till they had joined in their Easter communion.

The Vicar was a man of large experience, and he had learnt not to be very much surprised at the extraordinary coincidences of life, and to believe in the truth of the saying that it is the unexpected which happens. But, with all his knowledge of life, he would hardly have credited the words of one who had foretold to him that within a few weeks of his denunciation of the stage he should be under the deepest of obligations to an operatic singer, and should have joined with him, and with his long-lost son, in the most sacred act of worship and sign of fellowship.

CHAPTER VIII.

CONVALESCENT.

"Look not on thine own loss, but look beyond,
And take the Cross for glory and for guide."

MRS. HAMILTON KING.

WHEN the excitement of Sardoni's visit was over, Carlo flagged a little, but the weariness and languor were far less trying to bear than what followed. He could live patiently enough through those days—could even enjoy the family life going on around him—could be quietly amused at Kate's efforts to conform him to her own ideal of what a young man should be—could

find comfort in talking to Clare about the old days at Casa Bella, and about his mother.

But by-and-by, when his strength returned, there came very different days—days when he felt that to live any longer without Francesca was more than mortal man could bear—days when in very truth his own words to her in the belvedere were fulfilled, and to be without her was to be crucified. His love for Francesca was no light sentiment, no passing fancy; it was the strongest, most ardent love that man can feel for woman. He loved her with his whole being—with the passionate warmth of a southern nature—with the force of a pure and noble soul—with the lofty, undying devotion of an awakened spirit. It was inevitable that he should suffer; and though of course such times were nothing new to him, he could not in his present state plunge into work, or into the affairs of other people, as in his ordinary life he had found comfort in doing.

Worst of all, he knew that his kindly host—the only one able to guess what was the matter with him—desired nothing so much as to see him quitting the stage and marrying his niece.

But if pain was inevitable, failure was not so. He loved as a man loves at four-and-twenty, but he had the strength of one who has resolutely denied himself and honestly tried to be true to his profession; "his strength was as the strength of ten." And when Mr. Britton urged his view of the case upon him with the best and kindest of intentions, he always fell back on the certainty that his duty had been made clear to him, and on the faith which was his great stronghold, and

which, in its fearless unselfishness, differed as much from credulity as day from night.

Strangely enough, the man to whom he instinctively turned most at this time was Sardoni's father. He disagreed with the Vicar on politics, on many theological points, on the question of the stage, and on most other things, and yet there was something in the man's great goodness which made all else quite a secondary consideration, which even made one forget his tendency to lay down the law, and only delight in the sense of his devotion. Without that touch of dogmatism he would have been a saint; his failing interfered a good deal with his influence in most quarters, but with Carlo hardly at all. The beautiful goodness of the man attracted him too strongly, and quite eclipsed all else. It was a relief, too, when he was allowed to go out again for the briefest of airings on sunny days when the wind was favourable; and after a time he was able to read Dante with Kate and Lucy, and to study *Zampa*, and, little by little, to find that the outer world was not so altogether flavourless as in his dark days it had seemed.

One sunny spring day, when the doctor had allowed him to go for a short drive, Clare and Kate took him for the first time outside the Merlebank grounds, and drove him through the little village of Cleevering. By this time he had himself pretty well in hand—had schooled himself into a sort of content with incompleteness—had worked himself round to the state in which he could feel that it was at any rate something to be with Francesca's relations, to hear her name every now and then, to be at least certain of knowing if she were in any particular need or trouble.

"We may as well call for the letters as we are passing the post-office," said Kate, drawing up at the village shop. She sprang out of the chaise, Carlo offering to hold the pony for her. He had neither ridden nor driven since he had left Italy, and the mere feeling of the reins between his fingers awoke new life within him; it was long since he had been able really to desire any attainable thing, but now he was seized with a strong desire to ride once more, and the mere capability of wishing was a relief. He had an almost boyish pleasure in feeling the movements of the pony's head as it champed the bit, in hearing the impatient pawing of the ground.

"Two letters for you, Clare," said Kate, reappearing; and Clare took them rather anxiously, and opening the one from her home began to read.

"None for me?" asked Carlo.

"Not one," said Kate, tossing two or three envelopes on to the vacant seat. He instantly detected that one of them bore the blue stamp of Italy. Was it from Francesca? he wondered, or perhaps from Captain Britton to his brother? It was something to be staying in a house where letters were received from Casa Bella, and yet it was a sort of torture to him to sit quietly in the pony-chaise, obliged to content himself with studying the length of King Humbert's moustache and the big letters of "NAPOLI" on the postmark. Doubtless, he thought, the letter had been posted as they went in to church on Sunday, and he hardly knew whether the thought made him feel nearer to his love or more hopelessly cut off from her. He did not dare to ask any questions lest he should awaken Kate's suspicion, but

he hoped against hope that she would speak and put him out of his suspense. Kate, however, talked of the scenery, and the weather, and the spring-green of the trees, and of every unimportant thing under the sun; but of that letter she said not a word, and he had to endure walking upstairs behind her when they reached the house and seeing her disappear with it into her own room.

It was hard; but then sore need had taught him to be thankful for small mercies, and he cheered himself with the reflection that at any rate he was now tolerably certain that the letter was from Francesca herself, that by this time she knew of his illness, for Clare had mentioned it in one of her letters, and that it was even remotely possible that the Captain might have permitted her to send some message. Torturing himself with hopes and fears after the manner of lovers, he waited as long as he could make himself wait upstairs, then, with the hope predominating and the impatience no longer to be resisted, found his way into the drawing-room and looked eagerly round for Kate. The room was empty, but on the mantelpiece there gleamed the blue King Humbert and the big "NAPOLI," and the direction in Francesca's own writing to "Miss Britton, Merlebank, nr. Ashborough, Inghilterra."

He longed to snatch it up and kiss it, but restrained himself because even the envelope was not his; with a sigh he crossed the room and tried to make the time pass by playing all Francesca's favourite airs, and after what seemed a long while the footman came in with the afternoon tea, and was soon followed by Mr. Britton.

"You are early home this afternoon," said Carlo,

leaving the piano and shivering a little as he came over to the fire.

"I have an appointment at Cleevering at half-past five, and thought I would snatch a cup of tea on the way," said Mr. Britton. "You don't look quite so well; I'm afraid you have been overtiring yourself."

"Oh, no, thank you," said Carlo, wondering how his companion could stand within a yard of Francesca's letter and not notice it. "I have been for a drive to-day, and enjoyed it very much."

"That's right," said the shipbuilder, in his kindly voice. "We must begin to lionise you now that you are getting stronger. You ought to go over to Tancroft Castle: it is a fine old Norman ruin. You would find a great deal to interest you there."

Carlo thought differently; at any rate just at the present moment he was inclined to wish all fine old Norman ruins at the bottom of the sea. It was horrible to feel that he, with his ardent love, must be patiently polite, and must depend on others for the smallest scrap of tidings from Francesca. At length old Bevis, the deer-hound, came to his help, by stretching up his head and licking his master's hand. Mr. Britton bent down to pat his old favourite, and as he raised his head again his eye was attracted by the foreign letter on the mantelpiece.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "a letter from Casa Bella? What news?"

"I do not know," said Carlo. "I was not here when Miss Britton read it."

Something of the chafed, impatient craving, which was making tumult in his heart, found its way into his

voice. Mr. Britton, understanding all perfectly well, felt very sorry for him. He took up the letter, and going out into the hall called his daughter.

Kate came running downstairs in reply to the summons, looking hurried and annoyed.

"How early you have come home, father!" she exclaimed. "I was just trying to get the 'Mothers'-Meeting' accounts right."

"I am sorry to have interrupted you, my dear; but will you make tea, for I have to go down to the village directly?"

Kate, in no very good temper, approached the teatable, perceived that the tray was crooked, and set it straight with a gesture betraying inward irritation. Carlo, as usual, offered his services with the kettle, but was so absent-minded that he was far from proving an efficient helper, and only made Kate feel that everything was conspiring together to annoy her. Surely only a lover could have been so absent as to go on filling a teapot till it overflowed, and to be deaf to repeated orders to stop! Was this tiresome Italian really going to fall in love with the daughter of his host like the hero of a novel?

All his apologies could not make her unbend from the chilly reserve in which she encased herself.

"What news from Casa Bella?" asked Mr. Britton, when the disaster on the tea-tray no longer engrossed the general attention.

"Oh!" said Kate, bestowing a cup of tea on Carlo with a frigid air that was quite lost on him, "Francesca writes to ask if she may come next week instead of in June. It's very provoking, for I shall be so busy

just then, and there will be no tennis or anything to amuse her."

Carlo did not dare to raise his eyes lest the wild rapture of hope which was filling them should become visible to Kate. He sat mechanically stirring his tea, making so strong an effort to control his face and keep his joy secret, that he felt as if his features must have become as expressionless as a block of wood."

"I don't fancy she is much of a tennis-player," said Mr. Britton. "Is there no enclosure for me?"

"Oh, yes, I beg your pardon, father; I quite forgot; there is a line for you from Uncle Britton and a little note from Francesca, too."

Mr. Britton glanced through them, then deliberately handed Francesca's note to Carlo, possibly intending his daughter to draw her own conclusions from the act.

"I am glad she comes earlier, you two are old friends, and it would be a pity that you should not meet."

But Kate observed nothing, for she was full of her preconceived theory. She did not notice the quick flush which rose to Carlo's brow as he took the letter; instead, she was secretly resolving to lose no opportunity of snubbing the Italian, and proving that she was quite indifferent to him, and was above that despicable feminine weakness of falling in love with a handsome face and a fine voice.

"Will you have any more tea, Signor Donati?" she asked, in her coldly polite voice.

"No more, thank you," said Carlo, looking up for a moment from the letter.

His eyes startled her, there was an expression in

their dark, liquid depths which she had never seen before in the eyes of any man. She got up quickly.

"If you'll excuse me, father, I will just finish those accounts," she said. "Clare and the girls will be down directly."

Meanwhile, Carlo, feeling like one in a beautiful dream, which is only marred by the dim consciousness that there must be an awaking, read and re-read the following note:—

"DEAR UNCLE GEORGE,—Thank you so much for your letters; I never thought it possible that father would let me come, but something in your note to him has made him consent; and also, perhaps, something that has happened here makes him see that I had better leave home for a little while. It was just like you to keep your promise in that way, and be Carlo's friend, and just like you, too, to write so often, for I have been dreadfully anxious. Father says, can you conveniently meet me, or send some one to meet me, at Charing Cross by the tidal train on Wednesday morning? He does not much like me to come such a long way alone, and the lady with whom I travel from Naples only goes as far as London.

"Ever, dear Uncle, your loving niece,

"FRANCESCA BRITTON."

He had his moments of unalloyed bliss, then came the inevitable awaking.

"Do you think I ought to go away?" he said, returning the letter to Mr. Britton.

There was something so appealing in his tone that

Mr. Britton felt a genuine thrill of pleasure in being able to answer, with a clear conscience,—

“Certainly not; the most scrupulous sense of honour can’t demand that, since her father is perfectly well aware that you are staying with us.”

“What do you think makes him willing to let us meet?” said Carlo, anxiously.

“Well, to speak quite frankly, I think that probably Francesca has just refused some good offer of marriage, and that my brother finds that it is hopeless to see her settled in life as he would wish while her heart is here at Merlebank. Very possibly he hopes,—as I, too, confess I hope,—that circumstances will lead you to see that it is useless for you to continue any longer on the stage, and that all may end well, and you and Francesca be ‘very happy ever after,’ as they say in the stories.”

Carlo was silent, for suddenly, in that comfortable English drawing-room, there flashed across his mind the old temptation, which he thought could never have risen again after the decisive blow dealt it in the garden at Villa Bruno. This time the strong point of his character, his genuine humility, was appealed to.

“See,” urged the tempter, “you are wrecking Francesca’s life and your own all from an overstrained notion of self-sacrifice. Is it likely you will succeed in saving Anita? Leave that to better and wiser people. All the best men and women you know think you are mistaken,—think that you will fail. Are you going to be so headstrong and conceited as still to persist in this unnecessary sacrifice? You have tried your best, and have failed,—you know that you have miserably

failed. To go on longer would be mere presumption and vanity."

He turned away and stood in the window, looking out at the mellow western sky and at the grassy slopes beneath the trees in the park, where sheep were peacefully feeding. The sight made him think of the thorn-crowned Shepherd. But instantly the fiend turned even this to his advantage, and beset him more vigorously than ever.

"Are you so stupid and vain as to think the world needs such a man as you to take care of it? Go home to Italy, and live the peaceful life for which you are so much better fitted. Do you think the Good Shepherd needs *your* help? Do you think He can't get on just as well without *you*?"

But the vision of the Constant Shepherd would not fade, and a voice, less vehement but more familiar to him, said plainly, "Follow Me."

"Do you mean to say," resumed the fiend, "that you are going to bear all your life this miserable incompleteness? Remember what you have suffered this last fortnight! If you think you can bear such misery for long you are mistaken. All your life long—think of it!—think of it! If you dream of being strong enough to bear such a life you vastly overrate your own powers."

But again, more clearly, the other voice repeated, "Follow Me!"

At this minute Clare and the younger girls entered the drawing-room.

"Have you had tea, Signor Donati?" said Molly, who dearly loved officiating at the tea-table in the absence of her elders and betters.

"Did you like your drive?" chirped Flo, dancing up to him in her free, childish fashion.

He came back with an effort to the outer life, and began to hand about plates of cake and bread-and-butter, and to wait upon every one, as was his wont, while Mr. Britton told Clare about Francesca's visit.

"Why, that will seem delightfully natural to have both you and Francesca here with me," said Clare. "You will like to meet her again, and hear all the news from Pozzuoli."

"Yes, unless my doctor has permitted me by that time to set to work again," said Carlo, quietly.

"Oh, but he will not; you know he said nine weeks from the first."

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Britton, "you need at least three more weeks' rest before thinking of work,—myself I doubt if even then you will be fit for it; we shall see what Kavanagh says."

No more passed on the subject just then, but after dinner, when Harry had left the dining-room to escort Kate down to one of her evening classes in the village, Carlo spoke once more about it to Mr. Britton, having gained much in the interval.

"What I want to ask you is this," he began, in his direct, unembarrassed way; "Am I justified in staying on here in the same house with Francesca when I have not the least idea of renouncing the stage, when I hope to be able to resist all temptations to yield, when I sincerely believe that Captain Britton's expectations will be frustrated?"

"I like you the better for thinking out the matter so frankly," said Mr. Britton; "but it seems to me that

the responsibility rests with my brother. If he chooses to send Francesca here I don't see that you are bound to trouble about his expectations. I suppose it will, at any rate, be some comfort to you both to meet even as ordinary acquaintances with other people around, and I advise you to get what pleasure you can out of the slight concession my brother has been willing to make. 'Take the goods the gods provide you.' You can certainly do that with a clear conscience."

"Thank you," said Carlo, gratefully; "it has been a great help to talk it over with you. I think I may stay."

The week of rapturous expectation that followed was the happiest he had known since the abrupt ending of his betrothal. He went about with a glad light in his eyes, which made Kate more and more repressive; his step was no longer the step of an invalid, his voice grew stronger each day, he felt in harmony with the delicious spring weather, for all cares had faded from his mind, and he was conscious once more of youth and hope,—conscious that of late he had felt preposterously old, and that now he felt ridiculously but delightfully young.

Counting the days, and indeed the very hours, he lived through the interval, and at length the day on which Francesca was expected came. But, to his surprise, as it advanced, the expectation changed to torment; he could only sit watching the clock, and from time to time looking from the window with a restless agitation which put happiness out of the question. At last the supreme moment arrived; he heard the wheels

of the carriage and the sudden rush of girls from the schoolroom; then Clare looked in for a minute.

"She is just here; but don't come out into the hall, Carlo, for the wind is so cold to-day."

He made some sort of reply and felt relieved that Clare left the drawing-room door open as she hastened out to greet her pupil. Good heavens! how was he to meet her like an ordinary acquaintance! His breathing was laboured, his heart throbbed, he trembled from head to foot; yet through it all he listened with longing indescribable. Ah, yes! that was her voice! above all the tumult within and without.

"How are you, dear Clare?" it said; and again, after a pause, "A beautiful crossing, thank you. Why, Flo, how you have grown!"

The voice was drawing nearer and nearer, the oppression grew frightful. With an effort he rose to his feet, and at that instant caught the first glimpse of his love as she crossed the hall—the pure, sweet, delicate face, with its lovely colouring; the slight, lithe figure; the grey eyes, seeking him out eagerly, yet so shyly. He went quickly forward to meet her, unable to feel for very excess of feeling, bewildered and overpowered by the tumult that her presence caused.

And yet it was all over so soon, this meeting which he had rehearsed so often, both waking and sleeping; a conventional hand-clasp, a smile carefully regulated, a few quick words of Italian, since his native tongue came naturally to him, and for the moment he could not remember a single word of English. After that there was a pause which he did not dare to break because he knew he could not steady his voice, all he

could do was to try to look and move naturally, and to get back the perception that his arms were his own in time to hand about the cups of tea which Kate, in her cool, business-like way, was preparing.

After a while he began to hear what the others were saying, and soon Francesca's sweet, low voice thrilled through him once more, and before long he was carried away by the happiness of the present, and, forgetting the past, dared to put in his oar, so that the conversation became general, he taking a natural share in it, and falling back to the old footing of the days when Francesca had been his playmate and friend.

At first the mere possibility of looking at her, talking to her, and waiting on her, kept him happy. When Mr. Britton was present he was a little less at his ease, because he knew that the kindly host was well aware of their story; but by day, when only old Mrs. Britton, or Clare, or the girls were present, he seemed really able to ignore the past, and act as though their three weeks' betrothal had never been. The sense of helping her to play this part, the knowledge that he could shield and protect her, was no small incentive, though at times he half wished that Captain Britton had permitted Clare to be told, because her sympathy would have been so well worth having.

As to Kate, both the lovers were unable to help being amused by her, for Francesca quickly perceived her desire to convert Carlo to her own ideas, and Carlo instinctively knew that she had perceived it.

But one rainy morning, when the two girls were at work in the morning-room, Francesca found that there

are times when an undeclared love-story has its disadvantages.

"I have hardly seen you alone, yet," began Kate, "and there is so much I wanted to talk to you about. But you see I have been so frightfully busy since you came; indeed it has been one incessant rush of work all through the spring, and having Signor Donati here takes up more time than people might fancy."

"It was so good of uncle to ask him here," said Francesca, keeping her eyes fixed on her needlework.

"Father is always doing that kind of thing. But we have never had a visitor here for so long whom I felt to understand so little; I don't think I like him very much."

"Don't you?" said Francesca, stifling a strong inclination to laugh.

"Well, he is so deceptive; he gives you the impression of being so good and thinking so much of other people, and yet I can't make out that he has done one single stroke of good, useful work in his life. He seems to me exactly like the fig-tree which had nothing but leaves. How can he bear to waste his life on the stage?"

"You must not malign my old friend," said Francesca, flushing crimson, yet still feeling more amused than angry, because Kate was so ludicrously mistaken, and so perfectly convinced that she must infallibly be right.

"Well; since you are his friend, do just candidly tell me,— Is he so good as Clare makes out? Is he really so delightful as my father seems to think?"

The sceptical stress on the "Is he?" made the question all the more embarrassing. To be coolly asked

her unbiassed opinion of the man she loved was a new experience to Francesca; for a moment she lost her presence of mind. What in the world could she say? How was she to gain the composed tone needful for a reply?

"Oh, yes, indeed he is!" she said at length, in a tolerably natural tone. "I have known him for years and years, you know."

And then, because the answer seemed to her so absurdly inadequate, and because she was vexed with Kate for having asked such a question, she felt ready to cry.

But, luckily, Kate was not observant. She went on serenely, "Well, for my part, I don't understand that kind of man. I don't think I understand Italians at all."

At that moment Carlo entered, overhearing the last words. He at once guessed that Kate had been attacking Francesca as to his character, and knowing that they would feel uncomfortable, said in his easy way, "Not even after all our Dante readings, Miss Britton? Has not our great poet raised your opinion of his countrymen? I am afraid you are very hard on the South."

"Well, frankly," said Kate, "I don't understand southern natures; and why you are so wrapped up in your country I can't imagine."

"You see, to you, Italy is merely 'a geographical expression,' as Prince Metternich used to say. To me, it is the land for which my father, and his father before him, fought and died."

He broke off rather abruptly, afraid of repelling her English nature by too much warmth of utterance. He

had not lived so much among English people without learning to restrain his speech, and bring it round pretty nearly to the conventional terseness of a true Briton. Francesca knew that, had they been alone, a torrent of Italian would have escaped his lips, and the full force of his eager patriotism would have been revealed.

"You will think me very blunt," said Kate, "but I really don't see what you Italians have to be so proud of. I don't see that you have any great men to boast of—except, of course, painters and musicians."

Carlo laughed. "You will at least allow us Dante?"

"Dante belongs to the world," said Kate.

"True, that might also be said of Shakspeare; yet Shakspeare is English and Dante is Italian."

"Dante counts among the artists," said Kate, in her decided tone. "You have no other great men."

Francesca sat watching the disputants, intensely amused at Kate's calm, argumentative manner; as to Carlo, he seemed gradually losing his English sobriety, and the more Kate attacked his nation the more Italian he became.

"What!" he exclaimed. "Do you then wish for greater men than Galileo, than Savonarola, than Columbus, than Daniele Manin, than Mazzini, than Garibaldi? Is it nothing to have produced a man of science like Galvani, a saint like Francesco of Assisi, patriots like Pellico and Poerio?"

Now Silvio Pellico was no hero to Kate; she smiled at the mention of his name. He only meant to her a long dull Italian book which she had struggled half through, until, to her delight, she had been promoted to *I Promessi Sposi*. She had not lived with Pellico in

his stifling cell under the *piombi* at Venice, or wearied with him through his long years in the Austrian fortress, as Carlo had done in his childhood.

"You care so much for your country," she remarked, "but after all, patriotism seems to me a very narrow thing—we ought instead to love the whole human race."

He started to his feet with a gesture that surprised her.

"Believe me!" he exclaimed, "you are mistaken. There is no true love of race till you love your own land; just as there is no 'charity,' in the wide sense of the word, till you have genuine love for those of your own family. For what else are we set in families and in nations? And how is it that we have any number of people vaguely longing to work for 'humanity' and sentimentalising about the 'masses' in the humanitarian cant of the day, and a mere handful of men and women ready to make their own homes the heaven on earth that a home might be? It is because we all want to begin at the wrong end, to launch out on the great undertakings before we have been faithful to the smaller duties. Because we mistake the meaning of sacrifice, and choose our own way even in that, and hunger for the great, and the striking, and the picturesque, but are slow to sacrifice ourselves for one akin to us, or for a cause which is unattractive, or for a unit instead of a vague multitude."

There was a force and passion in what he said that appealed to Kate's honest nature. But the words struck home, because she knew only too well that, while ready to slave for her school-children or for the poor, she was often cross and tyrannical to her own brothers and

sisters. She thought Carlo must be alluding to her, but, as a matter of fact, she was far from his thoughts; and what made him able to speak with so much fire on an abstract subject was that he spoke of the things which he knew, of the things which he had proved by fierce and long conflict.

"And yet," said Kate, angry at having the tables turned on her, "you, who speak so enthusiastically about sacrifice, and all the rest of it, can be content to sing, and act, and amuse people, while the poor are starving, and sinning, and dying! You can be content to fiddle like Nero while Rome is burning! Oh, it seems to me unworthy of you! You can't be content with such a life!"

He turned his clear, deep eyes full upon her.

"With what I make of it—no," he replied. "With the life itself, with my calling—quite content—quite! See! a year ago I talked Socialism, and theorised, and longed to solve the problems of the day, and thought that by speaking and agitating the Utopian age would be brought on. But I see now that it is quite possible to theorise about the better arrangement of the world, and all the time to be neglecting perhaps your own relations—to wish to reclaim all the waste lands, and to misuse your own tiny strip of garden."

But here the conversation was abruptly ended, for at that minute Miss Claremont and Lucy came in armed with Dante and dictionaries, and Carlo said no more, but opening his copy of the *Inferno*, began, at Clare's request, to read to them.

CHAPTER IX.

BITTER-SWEET.

"Thou Who hast Thyself
Endured this fleshhood—knowing how, as a soaked
And sucking vesture, it can drag us down
And choke us in the melancholy Deep—
Sustain me, that with Thee I walk these waves
Resisting! Breathe me upward, Thou in me
Aspiring, Who art the Way, the Truth, the Life!—
That no truth henceforth seem indifferent,
No way to truth laborious, and no life—
Not even this life I live—intolerable!"

"Aurora Leigh."

IN the grounds at Merlebank there stood a pretty little log-hut, fantastically built, and divided within into two rooms. It had been the work of one of Mr. Britton's summer holidays many years ago, and had been specially built for the children. At first they had played in it incessantly, had learnt a fair amount of cookery with the help of the little stove in the outer room, and had found the place invaluable in all adventuring games wherein desert islands figured. But now they had rather out-grown this sort of thing, and "Mavis Hut," as it was called, served only for refreshments at garden-parties, for a convenient place to keep the lawn-tennis box, and occasionally for church decorations.

On the afternoon after the discussion with Carlo, Kate happened to be arranging the church vases in the inner room of Mavis Hut. She had been round the garden gathering the wet flowers, had taken all she wanted from the greenhouses, and now sat comfortably down to her work at the rough, wooden table, with the

brass vases and the lovely red and white flowers all ready to hand.

She felt still a little sore at the implied rebuke in Carlo's words that morning, but she was too good and well-meaning to blind herself to the truth. He had given her, whether consciously or unconsciously, a home-thrust; and Kate, though she disliked him in consequence, fully admitted the justice of the remarks as applied to herself. She sighed a little as she arranged her vases, then finding her own failings no very pleasant study, she turned her thoughts back to Carlo himself. He puzzled her more and more, but though she would have liked to think him conceited, or priggish, or hypocritical, she could not do so; the worst she could say of him was that he was living a worthless life, and that he was an inconsistent sort of man. His absence of self-consciousness appealed to her strongly, however, because it was incomprehensible to her; and, though persuading herself that she despised and disliked him, she knew all the time in her secret heart that this was largely owing to her own perversity.

The sun had been shining brightly a few minutes before, but as Kate arranged her flowers she noticed that the summer-house grew dark, and was not surprised to hear before long a steady downpour of rain.

"I daresay it will be over before I have finished," she thought to herself, and was going on with her work when, to her surprise, the door of the hut was opened, and Carlo walked into the outer room, evidently seeking shelter from the rain.

"What a bother!" thought Kate. "But, after all, though I can see him through this crack in the wood-

work, he can't see me. I don't think I shall let him know I am here; he would interrupt me, and perhaps talk again as he did this morning—and, besides, I dislike him!"

Hardly had she taken her resolution, when once more the outer door opened, and Francesca hurried in, wet and flushed.

"You here!" she exclaimed, in a voice so startled that Kate's attention was instantly arrested.

Carlo had been standing at one of the little lattice windows, watching the torrents of rain. She had not perceived him till she had closed the door behind her. He turned instantly. There was no time for thought. It was impossible that any recollection of Captain Britton or Anita should cloud that perfect moment. He was only conscious of two things—that Francesca was present, and that there was no longer the dreary necessity of behaving as though their love was non-existent.

"*Carina! Carina mia!*" he cried, crossing the hut at lightning speed; and the next moment Francesca was clasped in his arms.

All had passed so quickly that there had been no chance for poor Kate to make her presence known, and she sat now in the inner room petrified with astonishment. Her first thought was one of indignation, but when she saw that Francesca clung to her lover, sobbing pitifully, her heart was touched; and though she told herself that she "distinctly disapproved of this sort of nonsense," she began to see that there must be something in the past of her cousin and Signor Donati of which she was unaware,—probably an undeclared love-

story, well known to her father. What so likely as that he should have interested himself in the young Italian on this account, and himself have hastened Francesca's visit in the hope that the barrier between them—whatever it might be—would be removed?

All this flashed through Kate's mind as she watched the two who stood but a few paces from her, and heard with unwilling ears the mingled love and grief so little intended for any outsider. Yet what could she do? To leave the summer-house she must pass through the room in which they were talking—must not only put an end to the interview, but embarrass them past bearing.

Again, if she even moved a muscle, Carlo, with his preternaturally sharp hearing, would certainly notice it: she did not dare even to raise her hands to stop her ears, lest he should overhear the movement; and so in sore vexation she remained an unwilling spectator of all that passed. True, when they spoke low and fast in Italian, she could not always follow them, but very often they would suddenly relapse into English, and then every syllable could be heard through the thin wooden partition.

"Tell me," said Carlo, when, after a time, they sat down on the rustic seat at the other end of the hut, Francesca's head drawn close down on his shoulder,— "tell me, darling, this one thing. Why did your father wish you to leave home? Mr. Britton showed me your letter to him, and you said——"

"Well, I didn't mean to have told you," said Francesca, breaking in quickly; "but it was this, Carlino. Count Carossa—the man who took Villa Bruno, you know—

made father an offer of marriage for me, and that, of course, had to be declined, though father was vexed, and really wanted me to accept him. Then I had to speak, for I was afraid we should be constantly having such troubles; so I told him that though, of course, I would always obey him, and would consider my betrothal with you at an end, yet there was an inner sense in which it could never end for me, and I said all I dared to him about the future, yet could not move him. He doesn't see what a false position it puts me in—how hard it is to go out into the world, and keep people at a distance without being rude or prudish. Even Enrico Ritter at first was angry with me, because he thought I ought to have been able to freeze away the stupid men who will crowd round one at parties. Enrico is very good to me now, though; he is the one man worth speaking to in Naples, because he tells me when he has heard from you, and if you are well."

"He writes to tell me when he has seen you," said Carlo.

"It is only such a pity," continued Francesca, "that he is not Italian instead of German; then perhaps he would be a better talker and tell me more about you. He somehow gets in so little and stumbles so, and it is just as if I were starving and he were doling me out crumbs instead of bits of bread."

"It is a shame to abuse the dear old fellow," said Carlo, smiling; "yet that is just what I have felt all these months with his letters. Perhaps, after weeks of waiting, I get one very long, very clever, very philosophical, and then in the postscript he will remark, 'Miss Britton is all right; I saw her in the English

church on Sunday.' Not another word! If only Enrico could know what it means to be in love! And yet such crumbs are better than nothing. And he is the best and truest of friends."

"Yes; there is something so staunch and faithful about him. Oh! he has been so good to me, especially once at a ball when we overheard some wretches talking about you, and saying such horrid things of you."

"What sort of things?"

"Oh, I can't tell you—hateful things about your reasons for going on the stage. You see people can't understand the real reason, and so I suppose they try to invent one. I can't think, Carlo *mio*, how you bear it so patiently; how you could let Kate lecture you this morning about your useless life, and never get even a little bit angry. You wouldn't have done it a year ago."

"I am growing old, you see," he answered, smiling, "and that was nothing—nothing at all. I am a little sorry that I shock her, but you see it is inevitable."

"And your sister, what of her? Are you happier about her? Have you learnt to understand each other better?"

He sighed.

"It is uphill work. Did you know that Comerio followed us to England?"

"No, Enrico never told me that; I suppose he thought I should not know anything about such a bad character."

"He came to London when we were there in the winter. That has been the hardest part of it all; for I was beginning to knock up then, and all the time there

was the horrible feeling that he was hovering over me like a vulture, only waiting for me to fall that he might pounce down."

"That was what made you struggle on through that last opera," said Francesca, wiping away her tears; "Harry told me all about it the other day. But what happened? Did he take your place?"

Carlo signed an assent.

"He is there now."

"How hard it must have been for you to be helpless! What torture to have to lie there ill and think about it all!"

"Yes; it was hard till one remembered that of course it must be all right, and then it was a great comfort to be able to try to get well. Besides, I have a great hope that Nita's little boy will prove a safeguard to her; she begins really to care for him. My one fear is that Comerio may manage to get round Merlino and induce him not to renew his contract with me in the summer. I know he will move heaven and earth to go to America with the Company and to get me turned off."

"And Signor Merlino? What is he like? Do you dislike him so much as when you first saw him?"

"Do you know I have really grown fond of him. He is tyrannical, and has a bad temper, but I believe he honestly lives up to his lights. Now and then one gets out of heart with the whole concern, and then Merlino seems intolerable, but that has never been more than a passing mood with me."

"And you don't think stage life so black as it is painted by my father, for instance?"

"No, I do not," said Carlo; "it is less morally trying than I fancied, but more physically tiring. However, I shall be well set up after this long rest. I have written to propose going back at the end of next week, or, if it fits in with their arrangements, on the following Monday."

"So soon," said Francesca, with a little sob. "Oh, Carlino, I don't think you are strong enough; and it seems such a miserable, wandering life for you."

"All life without you, *carina*, must be hard," he said, stroking the crisp, brown hair from her forehead tenderly; "my only comfort is in hoping and fighting for Nita's safety. You must not think of the mere discomforts of the life—they are nothing—less than nothing. Indeed, I frankly tell you that never have I suffered so terribly as in this idle time, with everything so comfortable and luxurious all round. It seemed impossible to be willing to live without you, to endure this separation any longer. But, then, no impossible order is ever given except by bad generals—there is comfort in that. It is not impossible, *carina*, and it must be done."

"But I—I only have to stay at home; I can't even watch you fighting," sobbed Francesca. "That was always the fate of women. I have the wretched, easy life, and can only wonder and wonder what is happening to you. Oh, it is so hard! so hard!"

"Yes," he said; "it is the hardest lot. Yet, my own, you told me to go out; and even if you asked me, which I know you never would do, I could not now turn back."

"Of course not," she said, eagerly; "you will go

on, and in the end right must win. Perhaps they will no longer care for each other, or perhaps,—indeed, I try not to wish it exactly—Comerio might die, or——”

“Don’t let us try to look on,” said Carlo, with a shudder. “God helping me, I’ll be faithful to death, but I can’t manage more than a day at a time. And see, my own, the sun is shining again and the rain over. It is hard to say it, but I don’t think we have any business to stay here longer. Your father might justly complain, and we will not give him cause to do that.”

She clung to him, while her tears rained down. Kate could not see her face, but the sunlight fell full upon his, revealing plainly the terrible struggle he was passing through. It was all she could do to keep from sobbing when this man, whom she had disliked, and half despised,—this man, whose life she had compared to the barren fig-tree, began to speak.

“See, *carina*,” he said, falling back to his native language, and speaking with the direct simplicity which is as rare as it is attractive; “God is so just—so fair—don’t you think He must be nearest those who suffer? We have to be separated, darling, but yet there is compensation for us both. We can surely trust Him with our lives—yes, and delight in that!”

“But I can’t help being afraid for you,” she sobbed; “you are so far away, and how can I tell what may be happening when that bad man hates you so, and wants to get rid of you?”

“Yet it is often when we fear most that we learn not to fear,” he said. “Oh, I remember so well the first time that came to me! I was about Gigi’s age; it was at the time of one of the earthquake panics, and I

remember waking in an awful fright and trembling at the darkness and loneliness, then finding that there was One nearer than my mother, and that the house might fall or be swallowed up, yet He would be with us."

What followed was inaudible to Kate, but presently through her tears she saw that after a long embrace they parted, that he held the door open for Francesca, and let her pass out into the sunshine alone, then shut himself in once more, and began to pace to and fro in agitation which alarmed her.

She saw how strong a restraint he must have put on himself while Francesca was present, but now the limits of endurance seemed to be passed; he could but let his wild grief drive him as it would. Kate held her breath for awe while he paced to and fro, pausing for a while with a groan, and resting his head on his upraised hands as they clutched for support at the rough, wooden wall, then once more pacing the little room faster and yet faster, till with a stifled cry he threw himself down on the ground, and broke into passionate sobbing and tears.

The waiting seemed terribly long to her; she tried not to look at him, and fixed her eyes on the red and white flowers in the altar-vases, but still each stifled sob fell on her ear; and she, who had ever deemed herself a model of self-control, found her tears streaming down merely for sympathy. She had never seen a man cry before; indeed, she had cherished the idea, common to most girls, that men never do cry. The sight frightened her; it moved her strangely, and the relief was indescribable when at last he grew calmer.

Presently, with intervals between, came broken snatches of prayer, spoken always in Italian.

"My God! it must be that since Thou hast shown me Thy will Thou wilt give me strength to do it."

* * * *

"I know that Thou art stronger than these fiends that tear me."

* * * *

"If I could but feel Thee near all would be light, but I am in darkness and torment—past feeling—past thinking."

* * * *

"Yet the darkness is no darkness to Thee. Suffer me not to be false and selfish—a coward—a recreant!"

Again, after a long pause, the stillness of the hut was broken, but there was the dawning now of hope and triumph in his tone.

"My Lord, I thank Thee that Thou wert no passionless angel here, but a man—a man tempted as I am tempted. By Thy victory, by Thy faith, by Thy perfect love, oh, Christ, save me now!"

Kate waited in cramped, painful stillness, half fearing, half hoping to hear more; but he did not say another word, and after a time rose to his feet, and crossed the hut to look at the weather. The sun was shining brightly; he stood by the window for some minutes, apparently in deep thought; then, with a sigh, glanced lingeringly round the little room, arranged his manifold wraps in the Italian fashion against which Kate had been wont to inveigh, and left the summer-house.

When his footsteps had died away in the distance Kate snatched up her vases and fled. School hours

were not yet ended, and it was almost an unheard-of thing for her to go to the schoolroom during the younger girls' lessons; but she felt that for this Clare would forgive a breach of rules, and went boldly in with her request.

"Clare," she said, breathlessly, "will you spare me ten minutes for something that will not wait?"

Miss Claremont looked up in surprise, but one glance at Kate's face was enough for her; she rose directly, gave two or three brief directions to Molly and Flo, and followed Kate to her bedroom. As a girl, Kate had worshipped Miss Claremont; but she was now just at the time when the stage of worshipping one's elders and betters is ended, and the stage of friendship with them has hardly begun: there had been something not exactly amounting to a coolness between them for the last two years; but Clare, though she was human enough to be a little grieved, had understood it all perfectly, and knew that in time Kate would need her again, and would fall back into the old loving confidence, with the friendship of a woman substituted for the extravagant worship of a girl.

"You are in trouble, dear?" she asked, sitting down on the sofa, with that air of being perfectly at leisure and not in the least hurried which was peculiar to her.

Not without many tears Kate told her story.

"And, oh, what can I do?" she sobbed. "I have been an eavesdropper against my will; but what ought I to do?"

"The whole story is such a complete surprise to me," said Clare, slowly. "You must leave me a minute or two to think. Poor children! poor children! It was

natural enough! I wonder the thought never crossed my mind; but somehow I had always fancied quite a different love-story for Francesca, and I suppose that blinded me."

"I know what you are thinking of," said Kate. "I, too, thought that she and Harry cared for each other; and I used to be so jealous because he liked to be with her better than with me. Don't you remember that summer long ago, when you first came to live here?"

"Yes, I remember well," said Clare. "I suppose on his side it was a mere passing fancy, and on hers genuine cousinly liking, for she is exactly the same with him now. You understood that she had actually been betrothed to Carlo?"

"She said so, distinctly. I think it must have been broken off at the time he went on the stage, and that must clearly have been to save his sister from this Comerio. Oh, Clare! the horrible part to me is that I've misjudged him so cruelly! I can never forgive myself."

"I suspected from the first that it was in order to be with his sister that he took to the stage," said Clare. "But I little thought what he had to give up."

"Oh, if you could have seen him!" said poor Kate, crying anew at the recollection of the scene she had witnessed. "It was so terrible I can never forget it—I can never be the same again! I used to think it grand to be above that sort of thing; but I never knew till now what love meant."

Clare was not sorry that Kate's theories as to the depravity of man were annihilated. She let her talk on, putting in a sympathetic word now and then.

"I can't think how he can have helped hating me when I lectured him on things I knew nothing about, and told him he was like Nero, and talked just as if my life were perfection and his life useless."

"There is no pain so sharp as to find that we have misjudged another," said Clare; "and have blamed them when rather they should have been honoured and revered. But a sharp lesson like this stamps 'Judge not' on one's heart as nothing else can: it is a lesson we most of us have had to learn, dear."

"You don't think we ought to tell them that I was in the hut?"

"No; that could only make you all three very uncomfortable. I think you acted for the best in a very difficult position, and Carlo and Francesca may just as well keep all the comfort they can from that one interview; but I think it may be well to let your father know that we know."

"There can be no doubt that he must have learnt the story at Naples," said Kate. "I should like him to know about this afternoon, it will make me feel less of a hypocrite; but I wish you would tell him, Clare."

"I will, if you like, dear," she answered.

"And do come down quickly to afternoon tea, for I don't know how I shall meet them as if nothing had happened," said Kate.

"We will be quite punctual," replied Clare. "But I would not dread it too much; such things pass off more easily than you would fancy possible just now. Don't think of your own part in the matter at all, just put yourself in their place."

Left to herself once more, Kate sat still musing.

The strange and almost unprecedented insight she had gained that afternoon into the heart and life of another had altered her whole world. Through that revelation she saw everything in a new light, and the change bewildered her; she wanted time to think, for all her preconceived theories were overthrown; and though the actual sight of that struggle and victory had taught her more than thousands of sermons, or libraries of "good books," it had also sent her away with a crushing sense of her own shortcomings. Very honestly she sat and looked at her life. Her greatest wish had always been not to work among the respectable and humdrum poor, but to rescue the bad from lives of shame. She was constantly hankering after this particular work, and bitterly resented the assurance that she was too young to handle such subjects. Unluckily she was very intimate with some of those workers whose zeal outruns their discretion, and who spoil their brave efforts by making untimely allusions to them—by dragging them into conversations at table or in the drawing-room, till the hearers can only wonder what has become of English reserve. A doctor discussing horrible diseases and their cure in his family would be loudly and universally condemned; but those whose work it is to wage war on vice seem too often, in their eagerness, to think themselves justified in talking "shop" in and out of season. Kate had moreover acquired the terrible failing which seems to be becoming more and more of a danger among the really good and earnest—she was so eager in wishing to fight the evil that she began to take a sort of indignant delight in tracing evil back to its source, particularly when any well-known character was

involved. She took her excitement, not in reading the malicious gossip of society papers, but in discussing the latest scandal with the religious world. Yet nothing can be more certain than that social purity is never advanced by scandalmongering, albeit the scandal may have filtered through district-visitors and enthusiastic suppressors of vice.

This afternoon, in the light of the new revelation, Kate remembered with burning shame how angry she had been when two or three times she had tried to make inquiries as to the state of morals in theatrical life, and Carlo had courteously but firmly turned the conversation. She had accused him in her own mind of shuffling and evading the topic, had imagined everything bad of him; and now she found that this very man who would not discuss the matter, and who had none of the surface enthusiasm of her friends, had quietly devoted his life to the work of saving one woman.

"What is it that keeps him silent?" she thought to herself. "And what is it that makes me love to talk? Is the silent work 'golden?' Is the talk unwholesome? Yet 'out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.' There can be no harm in it then. No, that won't hold, though! because our hearts ought to be full of what we want to save them to, not what we want to save them from. And yet we can't very well talk of that side, or people would think it was all cant. That is an odd thing about Carlo Donati, he never seems afraid that people may think he is talking cant; I do believe he goes right on without thinking what people think of him at all. I fancy it is that he has

no conceit, and that I have a great deal; he does things quietly, and I with a fuss and a flourish. Who would have dreamt that with his quiet, easy way of going on, and all the time he was singing, and reading, and talking to us, he was living through such a fierce struggle! Oh, what a goose,—what a goose I have been! How hateful and contemptible to be afraid he was in love with me, when it was merely thinking of Francesca that made him look like that! And I have been snubbing him, and looking down on him, and talking such nonsense about him to Francesca herself! How they must despise me!”

With relief she turned, as Clare had advised her, from the thought of herself to the thought of her cousin and of Carlo. Hitherto she had considered Francesca to be very charming, very innocent, very reprehensibly idle; one of those girls who did not take up “parish work,” and who were deserving of mingled pity and blame. Now she asked herself honestly whether she could, in Francesca’s position, have given up all so bravely. And Madame Merlino, from all she had gathered about her from various sources, was no “interesting case,” but a very ordinary, commonplace, ill-tempered person, who as yet apparently was far from grateful for the sacrifice which had cost the lovers so much.

“For some charming, delightful person who cared for me I might have done it,” thought Kate; “but for one of those women like Madame Merlino, who just get into danger because they are weak and foolish, who are dull, and uninteresting, and heartless,—no, I could never have done it! Never!”

Again she went back to her recollections of that scene in the hut. What was it that had given Carlo power to choose this hard, distasteful life? Why had he been able to leave Francesca, and bear shame and loss, and grief? It was not that his love for her was less keen than the love of other men; on the contrary, the passionate fervour of his love had terrified Kate, had transcended all her dreams of what love in the best of men might mean.

It must be because he was trying with all his might, trying continuously, to live the Christ-life, which most of us do spasmodically, and not with the whole force of our nature; because his faith was perfect trust in One who was stronger than the darkness, the danger, the misery which overwhelmed him; One whom he knew and loved; One whom he desired above all things to serve with the free devotion of a man, not the grudging submission of a slave. It was clearly a faith which was independent of his feelings, independent of his intellect, independent of his surroundings; he had owned himself past feeling and past thinking; he had been overwhelmed with the temptations of that valley of the shadow of death, yet all the time had held unshaken to the one fact, which he knew as he knew his own identity—"Thou art with me!"

The clock striking five recalled her to the necessity of going downstairs, and of getting through as best she might the dreaded meeting.

"It serves me right," she thought to herself sadly. "I have been conceited and patronising, have looked on everything and spoken of everybody as from a superior height, and now I learn that I have been taking false,

distorted views, and have to begin life all over again."

The loss of her old self-confidence was no pleasant sensation, however salutary it might be; she entered the drawing-room apprehensively, and hardly knew whether to feel relieved or disappointed when she found Carlo bending over his copy of Verdi's *Ernani*, and looking exactly as usual. Perhaps she had not expected to see him bearing a long face, or an expression of conventionally pious resignation, but yet it astonished her to find that after passing through so much a man could in two hours' time so completely have regained control over look, and voice, and manner.

"I shall quite miss this delightful English institution of kettledrum," he remarked, pushing aside his book, and as usual coming forward to help her. "I'm afraid nothing would make it fit in, though, with the hours we have to keep."

A great lump rose in Kate's throat as she remembered how foolish and disagreeable she had been to him on the day when Francesca's letter had arrived, and had made him so absent-minded.

"And tea, I suppose, is not good before singing," she replied, putting forth the first platitude that came into her head.

"No," he said, with a smile which was wholly pleasant, and had no suspicion of sarcasm. "There are a few things which must be renounced even by the Neros who fiddle while Rome is burning!"

The genuinely humourous look in the eyes which but a little while ago she had seen full of tears, touched

Kate, she felt half choked, and her usually ready words faltered.

"I want to beg your pardon for saying that," she began, hesitatingly; "I don't really know anything about stage life,—I—I—" (the admission was hard to make) "have never even been inside a theatre; only somehow one gets into the way of picking up other people's notions and echoing them without really finding out the truth. I had no right to say such a thing, I hope you will forgive me."

His warm-hearted, Italian reception of the apology a little overwhelmed her, and she was glad that the entrance of Clare and the girls made the talk more general.

"The English seem to have a rooted idea that an actor must be a dangerous sort of fellow, and they generally look askance at a foreigner," said Carlo. "I don't think there are many Merlebanks ready to befriend fog-stricken singers, and I assure you I have become well accustomed to being regarded as a sort of dynamite, to be kept at a safe distance."

"The effect of Puritan traditions," said Clare. "But there is certainly something in the argument that now the stage is so greatly improved the attitude towards it ought to be changed. I am not sure, Carlo, that in the end you may not convert me."

"It is not I who ought to convert you, but the many English actors and actresses now living, who by their noble efforts to raise the drama, and by their own pure and upright lives, give the lie to the old view which the Puritans were no doubt quite warranted in holding. Or, if you will not be converted by the liv-

ing, at least study the lives of the dead; think of such a man as Phelps, such a woman as your Mrs. Siddons!"

The talk was interrupted by an abrupt question from Molly,—

"What can have become of Francesca? I never knew her late for tea before."

Kate felt herself colouring, but was relieved when Carlo quietly turned off the remark.

"Don't you think she may be finishing her sketch in the church?" he said.

"Oh, yes," said Molly, quite satisfied, "and perhaps she will stay on and hear them practise the anthem for to-morrow. It is our yearly festival to-morrow, you know. By-the-by, Kate, have you done the vases?"

"Yes," said Kate, snatching up a biscuit, and crossing the room to feed Bevis, that her burning cheeks might not attract notice.

Francesca did not appear till dinner-time. Kate glanced at her then apprehensively, and saw that she had not been nearly so successful as Carlo in getting rid of all traces of her emotion. It must have been patent to any one with eyes in his head that she had been crying; and Harry, with the inconvenient candour which cousins and brothers often exhibit, commented across the table on her appearance.

"Why, Francesca, you look dreadfully tired. Has Kate been showing you all the harrowing sights in her district, or telling you of the horrors of the Ashborough slums?"

She blushed and faltered; Kate longed helplessly to come to her rescue, but before she could think of a

single thing to say, Carlo had dashed recklessly into the conversation, not at all troubling himself about his matter or his manner, but only desirous to turn the subject somehow, and save Francesca from embarrassment.

"To slum!" he exclaimed, quickly, catching at the last word; "that is your new English verb, just invented, is it not? I was told in London that slumming had become a fashion. Is it so at Ashborough, too?"

"Not quite so much; the old houses in Ashborough are notorious for being infested with a particular kind of vermin, to which the fashionable have a mortal antipathy. I don't think it is likely to become very popular here to slum."

By this time Kate had recovered her presence of mind, and bravely kept the ball going, Clare helping her adroitly, and the lovers feeling relieved that all had been so well tided over. Kate was conscious all through the evening that Carlo was shielding Francesca from observation, talking more than usual to cover her silence, carrying Harry off to sing when he was making his way to the shady corner of the drawing-room where she had ensconced herself, and skilfully contriving to lead the conversation round to cards by volunteering to show them some Italian tricks, from which they somehow glided naturally into a rubber.

"He is managing us all," thought Kate to herself, admitting that the sensation was novel; "but it is for Francesca's sake; he does not seem to think about himself. How will he dispose of me, I wonder?"

She was not left long in doubt, for at that minute he turned to her.

"You have no class this evening?" he inquired. "Then I wish you would play us once more those *Kinder-Scenen* of Schumann's which you played the other night."

"Yes, Kate, do play," urged Harry; "I always get on better at whist with music going."

Whereupon, Carlo began to tell them a story which he had once heard of a gambler's wife, whose miserable lot it was every evening to sit at the piano, where, in a mirror, she could see the hands of her husband's dupes, and reveal to him by her playing what cards they held.

While he talked he had been finding her music for her, then with one swift glance towards the quiet corner where Francesca sat with her needlework, he went back to the card-table.

Kate could see him from where she sat, and as she played on dreamily, musing over that strange afternoon, and watching Carlo's untroubled face, she said to herself again and again, "I have been a fool! a fool! He is the bravest man I ever met, and the best!"

Miss Claremont told all to Mr. Britton that evening, and it was agreed that when she could find a good opportunity she should allow Carlo to see that she knew about his betrothal and its abrupt ending. A few words spoken by Mr. Kavanagh, the doctor, after his final visit to Carlo the next morning, made her doubly desirous to talk the whole matter over with him, and she was not sorry that the festival evening proved too cold and damp for him to risk going to church, so that he was left quite alone, and gladly accepted her invitation to come and chat comfortably over the schoolroom fire.

"This sort of life is very spoiling," he said, throwing himself back in an arm-chair with the easy grace which characterised all his movements, and glancing round the delightfully snug, homelike room. "I can't think what it is that you English people do to your houses; there is a charm about them one does not seem to get elsewhere."

"I wish you could have seen a little more of English homelife," said Clare. "If only you had been strong enough there are several people about here whom I should have liked you to meet."

"It is better not, perhaps," he replied; "I should only grow discontented with the life I shall have to go back to, and feel the contrast all the more between houses like this and the dingy lodging-houses and third-rate hotels which we have to frequent."

"It must be a wretched life, wandering from place to place," she said.

He sighed a little.

"There are a few discomforts, but, after all, they are but trifles. No; what I shall feel most is the going away from this home where all is congenial; away from all of you who can talk well on every subject under the sun; you who have so many interests, and who read and think. Some people do not seem to feel the atmosphere they live in, but to me it makes all the difference; it is stimulating to live in a household like this, and to be with a man like Mr. Britton; and it is depressing to live perpetually with people who take little interest in anything outside their own profession, and to hear nothing but gossip and stage talk."

"Then they are not very highly educated, I suppose, the members of Signor Merlino's Company?"

"No, except as regards music. Of course, you know, I am not a bit intellectual myself, and am nothing of a reader; but, all the same, I breathe better in this sort of atmosphere, perhaps merely because it is what I was accustomed to at home. If it were not for Sardoni, who is witty and clever, I don't know how I should bear the monotony of it. Sometimes I would give anything to be older and cleverer; many men would be able to alter the atmosphere,—Enrico Ritter, for instance, with his brains and his power as a talker, might work a revolution in the green-room."

Clare could have smiled at the notion of Enrico's gaining more real influence by his ready tongue than Carlo by his fascinating character and unselfish life, but she would not for the world have said anything which, even for a moment, could have broken the unconscious simplicity that was one of his great charms.

"I suppose Signor Sardoni is your only friend?" she said.

"Oh! he is a sort of brother to me, but many of them are my friends. That is one thing which makes up for many other shortcomings in stage life—the wonderful good-nature. I can't tell you how good-natured most of them have been to me, though I came among them as a novice, and am by far the youngest in the Company."

"I had always heard that there is so much jealousy in professional life."

"Well, that is true, too. There are jealousies and quarrels, but then so there are in private life; and no-

where in private life setting aside Merlebank, have I met with such real, genuine kindness as from men like Sardoni, and Caffieri, and Marioni,—indeed from almost all of them."

"Do you know I was talking this morning to Mr. Kavanagh?" said Clare. "I am such an old friend that I hope you will forgive me for meddling."

"My best nurse has certainly the first right to interview the doctor," said Carlo, smiling. "I like Mr. Kavanagh, though he seems rather inclined to think that everything must give way to the supreme duty of minding your own health. He reminds me of Marioni, who is so wrapped up in his profession that if the world were turned topsy-turvy he would only wonder what the effect would be on Italian opera."

"Mr. Kavanagh tells me he is a little afraid you do not quite understand his English."

"That is either a libel on his pronunciation or on my intellect. I understand him perfectly."

"He said," continued Clare, "that he did not think you could have grasped his meaning to-day after he had been sounding you, because you seemed hardly to bestow a thought on the matter, though he told you that this continuous public singing would either kill you or cure you. Did you gather that from what he said?"

"Yes, I did. He told me there was no disease of the lungs, but a slight delicacy, and that using my voice in this way would be a case of kill or cure. Of course I hope for the cure, but if the other thing comes why there is no more to be said. A singer may as fitly die in harness as any other man."

"But do you really mean to run so grave a risk? Life is surely a gift not to be treated lightly! Are you wise to try the sharp American winter, the long journeys, the singing, which you are told is a doubtful experiment?"

"It must seem stupid and headstrong to you, I am afraid, and I can't altogether explain it; but if what you believed to be your duty called you one way, and the care of your health called you another, I think you would agree that health must go to the wall."

"I want to tell you," began Clare, a little nervously, "that I have just learnt the true facts of the case. Mr. Britton, as you know, knew much and guessed the rest; and I hope, Carlo, you will not be vexed that I, too, should know about it. It was very blind of me never to have seen how matters were with you and Francesca."

"You really know about that?" he exclaimed, with relief. "Then we can talk quite plainly. I am glad that you know, more glad than I can tell you. I have longed to talk to you about it all these weeks. And then, too, you will be such a comfort to Francesca. You will take care of her next week—when I am gone."

His voice shook, and Clare felt the tears starting to her eyes for sympathy.

"You told me that you promised your mother to be with Madame Merlino," she said; "but if she had known all that the promise would cost you do you think she would have wished you to keep it?"

"Perhaps not; but I don't see that one can get any sort of guidance out of that. It is not because I made the promise that I must go on with the life, but be-

cause I know it to be right—know that I am called to do it.”

“I suppose it would not have been possible to induce your sister to leave the stage?”

“No. Her husband would never have consented to it for one thing; and then, even if she had done so, there would have been nothing to prevent Comerio from ending his engagement with Merlino, and following her wherever she chose to settle down. There was no way but this—there is no way.”

“Such a case is surely a heavy indictment against theatrical life,” said Clare.

“Do you think so? That seems to me hardly just. A scandal connected with the stage is in everyone’s mouth, but the sins of private people are hushed up and kindly forgotten, though there is not really more immorality among us than among them. If an actress loses her reputation you hear of it, because she has to live in the ‘fierce light’ of public life, and so you come to think that we are worse than the other professions. However, I feel with you, that Nita would probably have been safer and happier had she been brought up in a home like this, for instance, and had married in private life. Such a brave, noble woman as Domenica Borelli, or any woman capable of taking care of herself, may well become an actress if that is her true vocation. If she is not able to take care of herself, and is yet unable to retire from the stage, why then her husband, or father, or brother must do all he can to shield her.”

Clare was silent for some minutes; it was very hard to withstand the mingled humility and self-reliance which seemed so strangely blended in Carlo’s character,

He was a man who listened to advice and suggestion with the patience and deference of a child, but when once convinced of the right nothing could shake him; and she knew that it was his genuine goodness which gave him this power, the fearless faith which she had long ago noticed as the strong point in his nature, and which during all these years had been strengthening and developing. Young as he was, he seemed to her indeed well fitted to be poor Nita's champion, even while in her heart she longed to persuade him to turn back, blinded by her love for him and for Francesca.

The thought of Mr. Kavanagh's words returned to her with so keen a pang that to be silent was impossible.

"Yet surely," she urged, "there is a noble mistake which you may be falling into—an exaggerated self-sacrifice, a needless throwing away of life and happiness? After all, you know, the command is to love our neighbours *as* ourselves."

"Do you quite think that?" he said. "I thought it was now, 'Love one another as I have loved you.' It ought not to be as impossible as it seems to live out that rule."

He sighed, because he remembered that a few weeks ago the struggle had been to endure the being laid aside, while now his heart sided with Clare, and he only longed to be able to think her arguments right.

"You must recollect how ill you have been," she continued. "It is true you have recovered wonderfully fast, but it was a very severe attack of pleurisy; it seems to me that you ought to think very seriously indeed before venturing on the Western winter. And

even if your health stands the life, it is so miserable for you; I can't bear to think that you should have to go on with it year after year."

As she spoke, a vision of his future life rose before him. He thought of the monotonous gossip of the green-room, the perpetual bustle and confusion, the manifold packings and unpackings, the desolate lodgings, the long journeys; he thought of the insults of Gomez, the ill-temper of Merlino, the stinging words and cold manner of Anita, the unwelcome love and admiration of sentimental women, and, above all, of the daily martyrdom of separation from Francesca. His heart sank down like lead.

"It is humiliating to be such a creature of moods," he said; "last night I had got to the point of being content and even happy to have been called out to battle, and here I am hankering after love, and home, and peace again. Man is a contradictory animal, Clare!"

"If you are sure—quite sure—that you are choosing rightly, I will not say a word," she replied. "But you and Francesca are very dear to me, and I can't bear to think that you may be throwing away your life on a hopeless task, and bringing such a terrible grief to her. She is so young and fragile, so little fitted to bear great sorrow."

He tried to speak, but his voice failed him; he pushed back his chair and took several turns up and down the room, then returned to the fireside and stood with his elbows on the mantel-piece and his head in his hands.

"You see, Carlo," she resumed, "I can't help wishing Francesca to have the happiest life, and though I

would be the last to say that a single woman may not be extremely happy and useful, yet it does no good to blink the fact that her life is incomplete. You will think it strange that a very happy old maid of fifty should speak like this, but Fanny Kemble's words are very true,—‘Those who are alone must learn to be lonely;’ and we old people, who know how hard that is, shrink from the thought of the young ones setting out on the rough road by which we have travelled.”

“Clare, for God's sake say no more!” he exclaimed, turning towards her a face so full of anguish that she sorely regretted her words. “I must not turn back like a coward, even for love of her; but it is hard—so fearfully hard—when the very saints of the earth tempt one! And that she should have to suffer—that seems so unjust,—so intolerable!”

She signed to him to sit down on the sofa beside her, and looked with her quiet, shining eyes into his troubled ones.

“Francesca will not think that intolerable; to share your pain will be her comfort. And since you are called to make this choice which will bring shadow on both your lives, why then I have nothing more to say. Once sure of God's will we need not trouble about the rest.”

“And if I chose my own will now, why, I should not be fit to make Francesca happy,” he said, musingly. “Sometimes, Clare, it seems to me that the Donati are fated to give their lives for a forlorn hope.”

Clare mused over the well-known story of the two patriots. They had been called to give up home, and love, and at last life itself, to save their country from.

tyranny; the third Donati seemed to be called to give up home, and love, and possibly life also, to save one soul from sin. It was a less picturesque lot, but who would dare to say that it was lower?

"It is strange," she said at length; "but your very name means, 'A given man.'"

"Does Carlo mean 'man'? I never knew that before."

He fell into deep thought, and Clare noticed that his face gradually resumed its usual expression.

"After all," he said, presently, "it does seem strange that we should eternally be slipping back to a short-sighted selfishness. Betweenwhiles, one can only wonder at the fuss one makes over sorrow, and then comes a slight change in weather, or health, or people, or devils, and the struggle begins all over again. I see there is some truth in Captain Britton's accusation,—we Italians do love pleasure and ease, and do cordially detest storm and strife."

"Dear boy, I think English people are much the same!" said Clare, laughing. Then growing grave again, "But tell me, Carlo, is there nothing I can do for you? Since I can't see you as happy as I should wish, let me at least have some little way of helping you."

He took her hand in his courtly Italian fashion and kissed it.

"It is thinking what you have made of life, Clare, that will help us most," he said.

She coloured, and her eyes filled with tears.

"To be able to talk to you and write to you freely will be a comfort to Francesca, and do you think, Clare, you would sometimes write to me?"

"Of course I will," she replied warmly.

"Thank you, that will be something to look forward to. You see it is rather dreary to have no belongings in the world. Enrico Ritter is my only correspondent; for, though my old Maestro writes every now and then, he confines himself strictly to his one subject."

At that moment they were interrupted by one of the extraordinary coincidences which afford subject-matter to the Society for Psychical Research.

CHAPTER X.

A NEW PROPOSAL.

"Choose well; your choice is
Brief and yet endless."—GOETHE.

"Two gentlemen to see you, sir," announced the servant, advancing with a visiting-card on the salver.

Carlo having just given out that he had no belongings in the world, wondered who could possibly have arrived at this time in the evening to see him, and while the footman crossed the schoolroom had had time to wonder whether Merlino and Sardoni might, for some reason, need him; whether it could be a plot of Comerio's; whether Uncle Guido had at last relented and come to seek him out and make up their quarrel.

To his utter astonishment he read on the card the name of "Piale."

"Now, of all extraordinary things, that the dear old Maestro should come here just as I was speaking of him!" he exclaimed. "And the other? He sent in no card? Is he young, light-haired, German-looking?"

"No, sir," replied the servant, "middle-aged and looked like an English gentleman. He gave no card, sir."

Carlo's hope that possibly Enrico might have come over with Piale faded away, and asking Clare to excuse him he went down quickly to the drawing-room, where with one swift glance he perceived a stranger, tall, thin, business-like, evidently English, and dear old Piale himself, with his thick bush of grizzled hair, his parchment-like skin, and his eager, fiery eyes.

The warmth of the greeting between master and pupil must have amused the stranger; but perhaps he was well used to demonstrative foreigners, for the business-like air never forsook him for an instant as he watched the face and figure of the young Italian. By the time he had thoroughly scrutinised him, had taken in his various merits and defects, had glanced at the clock on the mantel-piece and at the open piano, the two friends remembered his presence, and Piale, with pride and emotion, said, as he turned towards him,—

"There, sir! now let me introduce to you my best pupil—not looking so much the worse for his illness as I had feared!"

"I had the pleasure of hearing Signor Donati several times in town last winter," said the Englishman, pleasantly; "and am glad to make his acquaintance."

"And your voice, my son?" said Piale, eagerly—"it has really not suffered, you think?"

"It seems all the better for the rest," said Carlo; "and I hope to be at work again in a week's time."

"Let me hear you!" said Piale. "Come! what will you sing to me? '*Il balen?*' '*Largo al factotum?*'"

What have we here? *Carmen!* Are you studying that?"

"Yes; we are to give it in America this autumn."

"Let me hear what you make of the Toreador's song!" said the Maestro, seating himself at the piano.

"But you are tired with your journey," suggested Carlo. "You say you have travelled night and day. Let me come over to-morrow to Ashborough and sing to you there."

"Bah!" exclaimed Piale, with a snort of contempt. "Am I to find more refreshment in eating or drinking or sleeping than in music, my friend?"

And with an expression of intense satisfaction he thundered out the introduction to the song, while Carlo obediently braced himself up to sing, anxious as ever to please the autocratic old man, but a little nervous about attempting this particular song, which he had only studied by himself, and slightly troubled by speculations as to the English stranger and Piale's hurried journey. Once before the Maestro had plotted against him, and he could not help fancying that the stranger had something to do with a possible engagement.

All this faded, however, the instant he began to sing. Piale's accompaniment was exhilarating. For the first time he began to feel that he was Escamillo, and his rendering of the song brought a look of perfect serenity over the Maestro's face, and drew forth hearty exclamations of "Bravo! bravo!" from the business-like Englishman.

He had hardly returned to himself and ceased to be the Toreador, when both visitors beset him, Piale with an impetuous gust of words, the stranger with more

eagerness of manner than might have been expected of an Englishman. He listened half bewildered to the proposal, only taking in by degrees that the stranger was a well-known London manager, that he was offering him an immediate engagement, precisely the engagement which would most advance his professional career,—that the terms were higher than anything he had ever dreamed of attaining to, that they made his weekly pittance in Merlino's Company seem more than ever scanty and insufficient. As in a dream, he listened to the praises heaped on him—to the assurances that he would be the lion of the London season, that already his appearance was eagerly awaited, since, even in the unsuccessful winter performances, and with health, and weather, and surroundings against him, he had made his mark in the musical world. For a minute he was dazzled by the brilliant prospects held out before him. Fame, a rapid and striking success, wealth and ease, thoroughly competent fellow-artistes, the London world at his feet, and his future assured,—what wonder if such a glowing possibility should for a minute attract him! And attract him it did. He longed for it as a few hours before he could not have believed it possible that he should have longed for anything having no connexion with Francesca. It seemed to him impossible to turn from this bright future to the dismal drudgery in the provinces with Merlino, the poverty, and hard work, and scant sympathy. He was young, and longed for happiness—an artist, and longed to bring his art to its highest perfection under the best conditions—a human being, and appreciation was cheering, and lack of recognition depressing.

But, for all that, above the eager representations of Piale and the London manager, and above his own personal craving for this new life, he could distinctly hear the inner voice, which had never failed him, repeating again and again, "Remember Anita! She has no one but you! Be faithful!"

Long before he had ended the struggle, came the necessity of making some sort of reply to the offer, but no one ever passed through a temptation and found all the time he desired for preparation. Every inch of the ground had to be contested, and even in his courteous thanks there was an unusual amount of hesitation, which the London manager put down to diffidence and inexperience. Piale, however, knowing him better, began to fear that it boded a refusal.

"You are not strong enough for the drudgery of a travelling Company," he exclaimed. "Everything points to your accepting this offer."

Carlo looked at him a trifle reproachfully, and his manner became less diffident and his words more to the point.

"The offer is indeed a very tempting one," he said; "but I fear I must refuse it. You see, sir, Merlino is my brother-in-law, and my engagement with him—though it may be ended next month, if either of us wishes it to be ended——"

The manager interrupted him.

"But the mere fact that the Impresario is your brother-in-law is surely in your favour. He would be interested in your success—would wish you to seize on this opportunity, which may be turned to very good account, I assure you."

Carlo gave Piale a glance which said as plainly as words, "See what a difficulty you have landed me in!"

The Maestro responded to it by a suggestion which relieved his conscience, and proved of some use to Carlo.

"Take a few hours to think it all over," he suggested. "I will come and see you again about it to-morrow."

"That is not a bad idea," said the manager. "But I must beg for a final answer to-morrow morning, for Metasti has failed me suddenly, and we are in great need of a baritone. If you refuse—but you'll not refuse, I hope. Signor Piale, you must talk him over!"

And after a little friendly banter, and a few skillfully-framed compliments, the manager rose to go, shaking hands cordially with Carlo.

"And I shall hope soon to number you in my Company!" were his parting words.

"Don't on any account come to the door!" said Piale, excitedly. "The damp night—your throat!—for Heaven's sake take care of your throat! And to-morrow I shall come over to receive your definite acceptance—nothing less, mind—a definite acceptance—or, *diavolo!* I shall think you have gone clean demented!"

For the greater part of that night Carlo fought the terrible craving that had seized him to accept the London offer. He was ashamed to find how ardently he longed for all that the manager had suggested; while Piale's assurance that he was not strong enough for the hard work in Merlino's Company had in it a truth which made it doubly dangerous. It was to be a case of kill or cure—the doctor had told him as much; and

though at first the idea had not in the least shaken his purpose, yet now that he was alone, with all around him dark and still, he began to consider the two possibilities.

There was that glowing picture of life and success which the London manager had painted. In imagination he lived through the inspiring reception, the artistic triumph; he thought of Piale's delight; he began even to fancy that, to crown all, it would prove indeed that "nothing succeeds like success," and that Captain Britton would at last be won over, would join in the general homage, and see that after all a son-in-law on the operatic stage was not a man to be despised. He was human and very young, and for a while he revelled in this thought.

Then, in sharp contrast, he saw another picture.

He was back in Merlino's Company, toiling through the familiar round of operas, overworked, underpaid—doing, as Sardoni put it, the "dirty work" of the troupe; his voice gradually failing, till he had sunk below the level even of Fasola, and had to content himself with the minor parts; and so on through a weary indefinite time; till at last, left behind by his companions in some far-away American hotel or hospital, he died alone among strangers, with no one near him who could even understand his native tongue.

To be killed by his work? When looked at in this fashion—when seen in detail—it was no attractive prospect! At four-and-twenty no healthy man can contemplate death without a strong natural repugnance; the mere "lust of finishing" chains him to this world where his work has but just begun. The old whose

work seems ended, or the young whose bodies are worn out by disease, may naturally long to die: but Carlo was not worn out either mentally or physically; he was at the threshold of life; and notwithstanding all he had been through, life looked beautiful and desirable, and death dark and unattractive. Whether right or wrong, these were his feelings, and he could not alter them in order to fit in with the ideas of the religious world.

And yet, without direct disobedience to his orders, he must choose the hard course and refuse the easy one. Tossing miserably to and fro, he wondered whether his whole life was to be like this; wondered whether every one had this hard wrestling with temptation; wondered how it was that most men seemed to drift along so comfortably. Did they all the time wage an unseen warfare like this? Or was he naturally more selfish and indolent? Or had the devil a special spite against him?

Then, in the midst of his questionings, there floated back to him the familiar words, "Men are not more willing to live the life of the Crucified."

Willing to live the life, indeed! Why, he had forgotten all about it! Had been thinking of a life of ease, and glory, and pleasure; had had his own interests in view, not the interests of other people; had consulted his own will, not the will of the All-Father. Slowly the ruling power of his life resumed its sway over him; and then, tired out with all he had gone through, he fell asleep from very exhaustion.

When he woke the night was over, the sun was shining, the thrushes and blackbirds were singing, the rooks were cawing, and by the light of the early morn-

ing he could see the familiar picture of the Constant Shepherd. The night of temptation was over, too, the darkness had passed, and what he had to do was as clear as day to him; moreover, he knew that he could do it.

He must definitely decline the London offer. He must not, as he was half tempted to do, mention it to Merlino, by way of inducing him to renew his engagement at once or to raise his salary. If he did this Merlino's suspicions might be roused; his brother-in-law would certainly wonder what prompted him to refuse so good an offer. Then, when Piale came over that day, he must beg him to mention Comerio to the London manager; he must move heaven and earth to procure for his rival the offer which he had declined. To say that he liked doing this would be untrue. It was undeniably bitter to him, but he saw that it would safely dispose of Comerio during the summer; and, moreover, he wished to be just, even to his enemy, and since he had been the means of ending one engagement for Comerio, it seemed but fair that he should do his best to help him when opportunity offered.

He found, however, that Piale hardly understood this view of the case, and his interview with the Maestro was stormy. In the end, however, Piale had to submit to the inevitable; and with a sigh and a shrug of the shoulders, owned that he could not stand against the folly of a man who had no eye to his own interests, and who deliberately threw away the very ticket which would have brought him a prize in the world's lottery.

He stayed to lunch at Merlebank, and diverted the Brittons very much by the mingled fondness and ferocity

with which he seemed to regard his pupil. He tried to win them over to sympathise with his disappointment; and it transpired that the instant he had heard of Metasti's illness, he had hurried to London to see if he could not obtain the engagement for his pupil.

"But, you see, he is bent on his own destruction," concluded the old man, with a gesture of impatience. "One might as well try to argue with a mule! However, my son, since you are set on going to America, let me give you one piece of advice—beware of damp beds; take my advice, and always sleep between the blankets."

Carlo made a gesture of horror.

"Now, dear Maestro, you really expect me to be too self-denying!"

"Self-denying, indeed! why, yes, the life of an opera-singer is one eternal practice of self-denial!" said Piale, gesticulating with his knife and fork.

Carlo laughed lightly.

"And I do my best to be your very good pupil, but at hotel blankets I draw the line!"

Francesca and Clare did all they could to talk the old man into a good humour, and to console him under his disappointment; and when Carlo parted with him at the Ashborough station, he was not at all sure that it was not emotion which made his answers so curt and his voice so gruff.

"You will not forget about Comerio?" he pleaded, at the very last moment.

Piale replied only by a grunt. But there was nothing but affection in his parting glance; and apparently he must have conciliated the London manager,

and spoken in high terms of Comerio, for in three days' time Carlo received the following letter from Sardonì:—

“DEAR VAL,

“Our worthy Comerio has fallen on his feet, and has obtained the height of his ambition—an engagement for the London season. Lucky is he who deserveth nothing! By what rule of philosophy or religion do you explain such an event? However, it is an ill wind that blows nobody good. We shall be quit of him, and—Heaven be praised!—this is the last week I shall have to keep an eye on him by day and share dressing-rooms with him by night. Your costumes are already being taken in and up; Comerio growled not a little at the nuisance of having them all refitted when he first came back. He remains in Merlino's good books, and has been fishing hard for America in the autumn; but when anything goes wrong it scores one to you, for the Impresario always swears that it would never have happened had you been in the Company. We go to Brighton on Whit-Sunday, and open the next day with *Faust*. It is supposed that the Whitsuntide holidays may make the thing a success; I have my doubts. However, with you as Valentino it may be. Write and tell me whether you come back on the Sunday or Monday, and I will meet you at the station. Monday will be all right, if you don't want to call a special rehearsal after the pleurisy; but as I'm sure you could do Valentino in your sleep, I don't see that we need be bothered with that. If you are at the Vicarage, you might mention that we sail in September, and that

I could spare a few days in August if they would like it. Gigi sends affectionate messages by the yard. He talks of little else but your return.

“Ever yours,

“SARDONI.”

Once again Carlo and Francesca kept their Whitsuntide together. It had fallen earlier than on the previous year, and it was no small comfort to Carlo that his last day at Merlebank should have chanced to be that quiet Sunday, when he was able to walk through the sunny grounds to church with Francesca, and later in the day to have a long quiet talk with her as to the future. Of Mr. Kavanagh's kill-or-cure verdict he would not allow her to hear a word; she was quite anxious enough about him already, and Clare agreed with him that there was no need to mention it. But the doctor's verdict troubled kind-hearted Mr. Britton; and when on the Monday morning the carriage was announced and all the family met together in the hall to wish Carlo good-bye, he watched with deep sympathy the silent handshake that passed between the lovers. They both tried so bravely to keep up appearances, that Mr. Britton was touched with compassion and drew Francesca aside into his study. If the work should indeed prove too much for Carlo, Francesca would never see him again. He would at least give them the comfort of a less public farewell; the Captain might possibly be vexed, but Mr. Britton was willing to risk something for the niece who was almost as dear to him as his own children.

“Donati,” he said, “just come in here one minute,

will you?" then, closing the door after Carlo, he gave him a little push on the shoulder, indicating that he should go across to Francesca.

Carlo did not speak, but he gave his host a grateful look, and Mr. Britton kindly turned his back on them and began to make hay in the papers on his table, to unlock a drawer with a most unusual rattling of his keys, and to behave as a kind-hearted uncle should behave under the circumstances. Presently, crossing the room, he opened the French window, signed to Francesca that she might beat a retreat into the garden and avoid the assembled family, then pioneered Carlo through the hall to the carriage, talking to him as if they were just ending the discussion of some business matter. There were manifold hand-shakings, good wishes, regrets, and entreaties from Flo that he would come again; but at last the ordeal was over, Carlo was shut into the carriage with Mr. Britton and was driven rapidly along the dusty road to Ashborough. He was quite silent, and sat gazing out at the green hedgerows, seeing nothing, however, but the inward vision of the woman he loved. Not till they had reached the town did he dare to trust his voice, but a sudden perception that the time left to him was short roused his native courtesy, and he tried to thank his host for all the great kindness shown to him during his illness.

"My dear fellow," said Mr. Britton, "I can only say it has been a great pleasure to have you. I look on you as my prospective nephew, you know, though for the present we must keep that hope to ourselves."

Carlo grasped his hand, those kindly words of hope seemed to put new life into him, and all through that

dark day they rang in his ears. Travelling to Brighton, among the hosts of holiday excursionists, he could not help remembering the drive back from Pompeii on that last Whit Monday. It was less than a year ago, and yet how endless the time seemed to him! How should he ever get through a whole lifetime when eleven months had seemed so long and weary? But, fortunately, he had long ago discovered that by trying to take in the idea of life as a whole we only give ourselves mental indigestion, and that a day at a time is as much as a man can healthily swallow. He turned quite away from both past and future, and taking out his copy of *Ernani*, began to study the part of Don Carlos with the close attention and imaginative power which made his impersonations so great a contrast to the average attainments of an operatic singer.

Sardoni was waiting for him at the Brighton station, and though the thought of returning to the old life had been distasteful, yet somehow he fell back into his old place very naturally, and talked cheerfully enough as they drove through the crowded streets to the Merlino's lodgings.

"Merlino has engaged a room for you," explained Sardoni; "they are staying close to the theatre, and I thought you would rather be with them. Marioni and I are down by the sea."

"And Comerio has gone?"

"Thank Heaven, yes! He came to see us off at Victoria last night. That London engagement came in the very nick of time. If it hadn't been for that I believe he would have managed to prevent your coming

back. These are your quarters, and look! there is Gigi on the balcony."

On catching sight of them the little fellow beat a hasty retreat, and came rushing headlong down the stairs, where, with a cry of joy, he flung himself into Carlo's arms, and clung with all the strength of a child's eager love round his neck.

"Mamma is upstairs," panted Gigi. "Come and see her."

Carlo, still carrying the little brown-faced fellow in his arms, went up to the sitting-room, looking anxiously towards the pretty, slim figure standing in the bow-window. The brother and sister had been long enough apart to see each other with something of the freshness of observation which comes to relations after they have been separated for some time.

Nita thought she had never before noticed what a beautiful face he had; Carlo perceived, as he had never perceived before, the worn, unsatisfied expression which was now so plainly visible about her mouth and in her eyes. "If I could only comfort her," he thought,—“if I could only get the least bit nearer to her!” But more than ever he felt that she kept him wilfully at a distance, and that her love for Comerio was an impassable barrier which must make her cold and distant to the man who had taken his place.

This was the hardest part of all, that he loved her, and yet could not win her love; that he had lost all to help her, and that she would not be helped; that he tried ceaselessly to break down the barrier between them, and that she as persistently tried to build it up again.

There was nothing for him to do but to go on

patiently, never despairing; but it was hard work, and his heart sank within him at the prospect, even while he talked cheerfully to Merlino and dined composedly, and answered Gigi's questions about Merlebank. He lingered behind the others to see the last of the little boy, then made his way along the colonnade to the stage-door of the theatre. The door-keeper looked up from his newspaper and gave him a friendly greeting, for Merlino's Company had had a very successful week at Brighton in November, and Carlo invariably won the hearts of all the officials by his pleasant manner and unwillingness to give any trouble.

"Hope you're better, sir," said the man. "I have a letter for you here."

He handed him an envelope; Carlo thanked him and passed on to his dressing-room, where, not without a certain repugnance, he perceived the crimson velvet costume, worn last Monday by Comerio, laid out for him. Then he looked again at the handwriting of his letter, and, failing to recognise it, began to wonder whether it would prove to be an unwelcome love-letter or a forgotten bill. It was late, however, and he dressed before satisfying his curiosity; then making his way to the green-room, opened it and glanced at the contents.

The letter was neither addressed nor signed, but he had not lived through all these months of public life without receiving sundry anonymous communications, some of them kindly, some of them grossly insulting.

This particular missive consisted solely of an Italian proverb:—"*Aspetta tempo e luogo a far tua vendetta, che la non si fa mai ben in fretta.*"—Wait time and

place to act thy revenge, for it is never well done in a hurry.

There was a vagueness about this which puzzled him. Was it from some outsider who would warn him that his haste in getting rid of Comerio had been impolitic? Or was it from Comerio himself, and did it imply that, although he might not at once revenge himself, yet Carlo was not to think that he had forgotten—that vengeance would most certainly follow him?

While he waited for his first entrance he showed the note to Sardoni, who at once solved the mystery by recognising Comerio's handwriting.

"That is from our friend the Corsican," he remarked; "I should know his writing anywhere."

"Is Comerio a Corsican? I never knew that. Then such a message is doubly significant."

"Why?" asked Sardoni.

"Because a Corsican never forgives. A Neapolitan may kill his man in sudden passion, but a Corsican will wait for years, and strike at last with the cool premeditation of a devil."

Sardoni looked grave, he could believe anything of such a man as Comerio, and he resolved to keep a sharp watch, and play the part of detective in the interests of his friend. It was not a very cheerful missive to receive just before going on the stage; but though Carlo candidly owned that the thought of a stealthy vengeance dogging his steps sent an occasional cold chill through his veins, yet he reminded himself that one can grow accustomed to almost anything, and that, after all, his enemy's vengeance was powerless to shorten the life that had been marked out for him by

a single hour. And perhaps his own private troubles helped him to give a yet more powerful rendering of the duel scene and the death of Valentino.

"It frightens me to act with you," was Nita's comment; "you make it all too horribly real, you die so dreadfully."

"Yet he is not so violent as Comerio," remarked old Bauer. "He does not push you away, for instance, but dies like a Christian, kissing the cross and forgiving you."

"The difference is," said Marioni, "that Comerio dies like an angry blusterer and Donati like a heart-broken hero. His voice seems better than ever after the rest."

The next morning Carlo felt a not unnatural reaction after the strain of the previous day: the long rest had, as Marioni remarked, strengthened his voice, but he felt ludicrously stiff after his two falls in the duel scene, and quite perceived that though being out of practice might not affect his acting at the time, yet it told severely on him afterwards, and made the work, to which in course of time he would become inured, a hard and wearing toil. After breakfast he strolled with Gigi through the Pavilion gardens; then, remembering that he had asked that letters from Merlebank might be directed to him at the General Post-office, he went to inquire if any had arrived, not exactly expecting any, but with a lover's restless hope for the improbable. His heart beat quickly when an envelope in Clare's writing was handed to him, but it only enclosed a letter from Enrico Ritter, which had arrived just after he had left Merlebank. Now that Francesca was in England, Enrico's

Letters meant much less to him, and he sauntered down Ship Street, and yielded to Gigi's entreaties to go on the beach before he began to read it. The letter was unusually short and abrupt, and had evidently been written in great haste.

"Prepare your mind for bad news, *amico mio*," it began. "Your uncle has died suddenly of an apoplexy, and I have just learnt the conditions of his will. He has kept his word, and has disinherited you, leaving every penny he possesses to the Little Sisters of the Poor. We are all, as you may imagine, in a fine state of indignation, and find it beyond human nature not to speak evil of the dead. I must warn you, too, that you have a living enemy, who is doing his best to rob you, not of money, but of your reputation. Some person or persons unknown have set on foot a scandal about you and Mlle. Borelli, and it is all over the place. Something of the sort was suggested last autumn; the first I heard of it was a mere surmise, half jestingly made at a ball; Miss Britton also overheard the words, and for her sake I made as light of them as possible, and, indeed, they were, I believe, lightly meant. Now it is possible, of course, that these words started the current slander, but I think it very probable that Comerio may have had a hand in the affair, and thought it best to tell you plainly the truth that you and Mlle. Borelli are the talk of Naples. You can now take whatever steps you think fit, and, of course, can count on us to fight your battles."

Carlo looked up from this ill-fated letter with a dazzled, confused feeling that all the world was against him. The calm, blue sea, and the pleasure-boats, and

the merry children playing on the shore, contrasted painfully enough with his troubled life. His uncle was dead, and had never forgiven him! The thought was a real grief, for he had loved the autocratic old man, and had hoped that some day all might be made right between them. Then there was that vile, that extraordinary slander. Burning wrath consumed him as he pictured to himself Domenica Borelli, of all women on earth, singled out to be the victim of such hateful gossip. And what could be done? How could such a slander be stamped out? It might be met with authoritative denial, but what would Neapolitan gossips care for that? Though very possibly Comerio might have circulated the story, yet it could not definitely be traced home to him; no one had heard him publicly make such a statement, and a prosecution was out of the question, even if he had been rich enough to afford it. No, he could do nothing but endure as patiently as might be; but he realised only too painfully that slander, however false, however actively contradicted, does in this world leave a slur, and that the purest life and the highest motives are no protection against those whose work consists of

“Peddling in the devil’s hardware,
Gossip and inuendo.”

And, alas! how little he had as yet gained. How far from satisfied could he as yet feel about Anita. For a mere hope he had lost everything; the love of poor old Uncle Guido, the inheritance that was his by right, the home and country which he loved, the wife who should have been his, and now either deliberate malice, or

mere careless and baleful talk, had robbed him of the last thing left to him,—his fair and stainless reputation.

He was very young, and when the first hot indignation had died away, he could only wonder, with a sort of blank astonishment, how that particular charge could possibly have been brought up against him. People might justly have reproached him with his hasty temper, his impatience, his love of ease and pleasure, with a hundred other faults of which he was perfectly conscious; but to fasten upon him that particular accusation, to charge him with the very sin from which he was trying at all costs to save another, that seemed to him hard measure, it wounded him as nothing else could have wounded him.

Those who know life well, and have bought their experience, and have gained that long-sighted vision which belongs to the full-grown, can, even in the first pain of a personal attack, "rejoice and be exceeding glad," and realise that the devil thinks their work worth molesting. But the young have always a feeling that the devil is not so black as he is painted, and that the world is, after all, kindly disposed, and so their first experience of injustice comes like a crushing blow; it amazes them, and they learn with a shudder that the world will always impute low motives, and that they must learn to expect this and bear it with composure.

The news in the letter which would have most painfully affected many—the account of the lost inheritance—was the last point which occurred to Carlo. Still he did not regard money with absolute indifference, or consider that there was any particular merit in poverty, and it was not in nature that a man of four-and-twenty

should lose a fortune and feel no pang of regret. Money was a power, there was no denying that, and he was living now from hand to mouth—a process less pleasant in practice than in theory. In the reaction from inordinate love of riches there is now-a-days a good deal of cant about “holy poverty” and “contemptible wealth;” but Carlo, being a very practical and simple-natured man, did not affect to look on the loss of his inheritance from any superior height of other-worldliness. It chafed him sorely to owe money to Herr Ritter and to see no immediate prospect of paying back the principal; it had cost him much to ask his doctor whether he would allow him to pay by instalments for the constant attendance through the weeks at Merlebank; it had pained him to have to calculate the cost of his journey to Brighton, and to find that his donations to the servants who had been so good to him must be of the smallest. For money in itself he cared not at all, but being in the true sense of the word a gentleman, he had a horror of being in debt, and found the constant care necessary to make both ends of his scanty income meet a most irksome duty. Such matters cannot be looked at in a vague, impersonal way; and though the ideal hero of sentimental romance is always above such contemptible considerations, yet a straightforward, honourable man is bound to care for the possession of such money as will enable him to pay his way honestly in the world. Carlo thought with a sigh of the thousands of pounds which he had been led to expect as his inheritance, and then of the constant struggle to live on his small salary. Comerio had received twelve guineas a-week, but he as a novice had

consented to take only half that amount, and Piale, thinking that he would never continue in a travelling company after the first year, had been fairly well satisfied with the arrangement, and, indeed, would have consented to anything so long as his wish of inducing his pupil to go on the stage had been gratified. Carlo had no intention, however, of accepting better offers at the end of the first year, so he saw before him an indefinite time of hard work and small pay, for he could not afford to bargain with Merlino or quarrel with him as any other novice might have done.

As Carlyle remarks, "No beautifulest poet is a bird of paradise, living on perfumes, sleeping in the æther, with outstretched wings. The heroic, *independent* of bed and board, is found in Drury Lane Theatre only."

But of his six guineas a-week he must somehow manage to pay for board, lodging, and clothes, must give the conventional gratuities to his dresser, must provide certain parts of his stage wardrobe—to wit, shoes, tights, wigs, and feathers,—must pay the interest on the loan from Herr Ritter, and try to put by as much as might be towards Mr. Kavanagh's account. He knew, of course, that many a clerk, many an English curate, had to count himself lucky if he got as large a salary, but then it was less possible for him to economise. Lodgings, hastily sought in a foreign country, often proved dear as well as comfortless; bills, even at third-rate hotels, seemed to mount up with frightful rapidity; while to play any pranks with his diet was out of the question, since his voice was dependent on regular and suitable food. He longed im-

patiently to be free from this grinding poverty which was so foreign to his nature, nor did it comfort him much to reflect that he was better off than many members of travelling companies, since, at any rate, Merlino always paid his way, was a man with capital, and was not for ever trembling on the brink of bankruptcy. It only made him feel very sorry for his brother artistes, and slightly curious to know how they managed to live at all.

He had reached this point in his reflections when Gigi came running up to him.

"I do so dreadfully want a spade and pail, *zio caro!*" he said, looking up at him with his wistful brown eyes.

"There are many things, my Gigi, which we do so dreadfully want, but can't have," he replied, laughing a little, and stroking the child's brown cheek. "You and I, Gigi, must learn to go without, and must do what we can to amuse each other."

And forgetting poverty, and slander, and even poor old Uncle Guido, he transformed himself into so delightful a sea-monster that Gigi rushed in blissful terror and excitement to the shelter of the nearest boat, and by the time the chase was over, and he had been devoured and resuscitated in the conventional manner, all thought of spades and pails had vanished from his mind, and he had fallen back to his old refrain of "I do love you so!"

CHAPTER XI.

AFTER TWO YEARS.

"Heart, thou must learn to do without—
 That is the riches of the poor;
 Their liberty is to endure;
 Wrap thou thy old cloak thee about,
 And carol loud, and carol stout!

* * * * *

Why should'st thou only wear no clout?
 Thou only walk in love-robcs pure?
 Thy step alone be firm and sure?
 Thou only free of fortune's flout?—
 Nay, nay! but learn to go without,
 And so be humbly, richly poor."

A Threefold Cord.

THE bright spring sunshine was streaming into a sitting-room in the Lafayette at Philadelphia, and Nita's sweet, clear soprano woke the echoes with that most charming of songs, "*Caro nome.*" Carlo, who from the first had constituted himself her accompanist at her daily practice, was seated at the piano, and something in the faces of both brother and sister showed plainly that time had passed. Two years had gone by since Carlo had rejoined the Company at Brighton, and spite of excessively hard work—spite of the weary day and night journeys, with too often an exhausting performance at the end of them—his healthy, vigorous nature had asserted itself, and all signs of delicacy of chest had disappeared, while further cultivation, and increasing physical strength, had rendered his voice more than ever notable. The daily round of work had

been monotonous enough, and yet the second and third years of his professional life had certainly seemed far shorter to him than the first had done. But then nothing flies so fast as fully occupied time, especially when no very important events come to interrupt the routine. And nothing had happened worthy of note in these two years. Comerio's vengeance had not as yet taken effect—he had not followed them to America; and scarcely any changes had been made in the Company. Mademoiselle de Caisne had, indeed, gone back to Italy, finding it impossible to make the slightest impression on the new baritone: her place had been filled by a very young American girl. It seemed probable, too, that Sardoni and Domenica Borelli would not remain very much longer in the troupe. They had now been betrothed for several months, and were to be married in New York before Merlino's Company sailed for Italy, which they expected to do towards the end of May. Carlo hardly knew how to face the thought of life without his two best friends, but their contracts with Merlino both expired in the following autumn, and he could not but admit that their married life would probably be much happier if they carried out Sardoni's idea, and settled down in London, where they might both hope to gain a fair livelihood by teaching, eked out by occasional engagements. Yet, though little had happened, the general tone of the Company had certainly been raised; the Impresario had become a trifle less rough and overbearing; Nita, though she was still as far as ever from being a happy wife, seemed to rebel less bitterly against her lot; while Carlo's character had grown and

developed as a man's character does develop when he is trying incessantly to live the highest life.

As he played the accompaniment of "*Caro nome*," his thoughts involuntarily turned to Francesca, and he began to wonder whether Sardoni would soon come back from his walk, and whether he would have remembered to call at the post-office for letters. It was possible that he might to-day hear from Enrico, and he was terribly hungry for news, for Clare, with the best of intentions, was too busy to write very often, and when she did write could only give him second-hand reports, while Enrico was as far as ever from understanding the sort of details for which a lover craves.

He looked up eagerly as the door opened and Sardoni entered.

"Did you remember the letters?" he asked, glad that the song should have ended at such an opportune moment.

"For a wonder, yes," replied Sardoni, who since his engagement to Domenica had been ludicrously absent-minded. "But there were none for you, Val, only one for Madame Merlino."

Carlo was sadly disappointed, but yet was so well used to disappointment that by the time he had played through a few bars of "*Caro nome*," his face had resumed its usual expression.

Sardoni left the room again, and Nita, throwing herself back in a rocking-chair, began to read her letter. As she read, an uncontrollable exclamation of surprise escaped her. Carlo, who was turning over the pages of *Rigoletto* and still whistling the air of "*Caro nome*," looked up quickly.

"Is anything the matter?" he asked, and as he spoke he noticed for the first time the big letters of the "Napoli," post-mark.

She read on without answering, but something in her face roused a nameless fear in his heart; did the letter concern Comerio? The handwriting was not Enrico's or his fears would have been instantly aroused; he would have imagined that some evil must have befallen Francesca—some evil which his friend did not dare to tell him abruptly and without preparation. But that fear was not awakened. It must, then, surely be connected with Comerio, this Italian letter! If only she would speak and put him out of his suspense!

He sat down near her and waited, not wishing to force himself upon her in any way; and at length she looked up and, with a strange tone in her voice, said, "I have heard from Mlle. de Caisne, Carlo. You had better read her letter, and she encloses these."

In some surprise he took the papers she handed to him, and glanced at the first. It was a half-sheet of paper, on the back of which the following words were written in Italian, "An advertisement cut out of the *Times*." Neatly pasted on the other side were a few brief lines of English print,—“On the 26th inst., at Naples, by the British Consul and by the Rev. J. Smith, RENATO, CONTE CAROSSA, to FRANCESCA, elder daughter of Captain JOHN BRITTON, R.N.”

Carlo neither spoke nor moved; the blow struck at his heart had been so fearfully sudden that after the first moment of agony he felt nothing, but was like one paralysed. Still holding the advertisement in his hand,

he stared at those words which had shattered his whole life; then, as sensation slowly returned, a horrible craving to know more seized him, and he snatched up the next paper. It was a leaflet printed in silver, an English wedding-hymn, "The voice that breathed o'er Eden;" he read it through from beginning to end with a sort of blank, dazed feeling. Then he took the next slip. It was a cutting from the *Roma*, just a short paragraph stating that the marriage of Count Carossa had called forth general attention, owing to the fact that his bride was the acknowledged *belle* of Naples. That the beautiful English girl had made a charming bride, and that according to the English custom the wedding-party had been entertained at breakfast after the ceremony at Casa Bella, the residence of Captain Britton.

Lastly, he read with feverish haste Mlle. de Caisne's letter, rushing impatiently through the preliminaries till he came to the following remark,—“The marriage of Count Carossa is the great topic of the day here, and knowing how intimate you and your brother were with the English owners of Casa Bella, I send you full particulars. The wedding was really a beautiful sight, the bride wore a dress of ivory-white satin with a very long train; and it really is wonderful how even in this climate English girls seem to preserve their complexion. Miss Britton's is the most charmingly delicate colouring I ever saw. Every one is envious of Count Carossa. I only hope he deserves so fascinating a wife.”

Carlo folded the papers and put them back in their envelope. Every vestige of colour had left his face, and Nita began to wonder whether he would ever move

or speak again—he looked as if he had been turned to stone. She was frightened, and yet the sight did not appeal to her, it even made her a little angry and impatient, for she had not heart enough to understand him.

There was a long, burdened silence, broken at length by Nita.

“Well,” she said, with a bitter tone in her voice; “now, at any rate, you will know what it means to have a legal bar between you and the one you love.”

At this his stony despair suddenly changed, the frozen blood seemed to boil in his veins, and a look of anguish, which terrified her, dawned in his eyes. Her words had most cruelly, most recklessly, thrust the terrible truth before him. He got up quickly, and walked with unsteady steps to the door, by a sort of blind instinct perceiving that to be away from his sister would be a relief.

But Nita had no sooner spoken than she regretted her words, and would have given anything to recall them. She rushed after him and caught his hand in hers.

“Don’t go, Carlo!” she cried. “I am sorry I said that—I am sorry for you. Carlino! Stay!”

Her presence was almost more than he could endure, but though past thinking definitely of anything but the crushing blow he had received and the torturing pain it caused him, the mere habit of considering others before himself made him pause now, though he longed sorely to be alone with his trouble.

“Ah, why should we have such things to bear?” she cried passionately, thinking even now far more of her own trouble than of his.

“God help us both!” he groaned.

Then, dropping her hand, he turned away and flung himself face downwards on the couch, unable to resist any longer the paroxysm of grief which overwhelmed him.

Nita watched him much as Kate Britton had watched him in the hut; her woman's soul was touched to the quick, and though only a minute before she had cried, "Why should we have such things to bear?" she saw now, with a sharp pang of regret, that Carlo's grief was the direct consequence of her own weakness. She fell down on her knees beside him.

"Carlino!" she sobbed, "forgive me—forgive me! It is I who have brought it all on you."

He did not look up or speak, but put out his hand for hers and held it fast in a grasp that seemed to burn her. She thought he grew calmer and ventured to speak again, longing to awaken his pity for her own case.

"Don't you see now, Carlo, that you have been expecting too much of me?" she pleaded. "Oh, don't you see now how all those ideas of yours are in practice impossible?"

Her last word, emphatically spoken, seemed to fill him with strength. In an instant he was on his feet, while she still knelt on, looking up at him in awe and astonishment. Somehow it seemed to her that she was face to face with the perfection of manhood.

"Nothing is impossible!" he said.

And the words seemed to ring and pulsate in her ears as no words had ever done before.

She cowered down and hid her face, trembling before the first divine revelation which had ever come to her innermost heart. It was a relief to her when she heard him leave the room, but the pitifulness of

the story overcame her again; the love, so far beyond any love of which she herself was yet capable, had at length touched her heart, and she sobbed for grief and pity.

"Why,—oh why," she thought, with bitter regret, "did I not from the first resist the evil thoughts that came? It must have been possible for me, too!"

In the meantime Carlo had locked himself into his own room, and there, pacing to and fro, looked his sorrow in the face like a man. Thousands, as he was well aware, must have been called to bear the same thing before, but yet there were circumstances which made his case doubly hard; the utter want of preparation, the dearth of all but the most public accounts of the marriage, the knowledge that of his own free will he had left Francesca and gone out into the world. For eight long years he had loved her, and though there had been grief, and trouble, and separation for them, yet he had been sure of her love through all, and had been free to lavish on her his heart's devotion. But now in one moment all was ended between them, and the thought of his love, which, in spite of the separation, had been an unfailing solace to him through these weary years of public life, was now only a torture, a peril. There would be no beautiful reality, all his own, to which he could come back when the day's work was over, as to some sacred and safe retreat; she was now the wife of another, and he must no longer think of her as his betrothed. His safe retreat had become a place of torment. He saw that life would be one long battle, and that the best he could hope for after long conflict, was so far to subdue himself

that he should dare to meet her as a friend; be able, perhaps, to serve her in some faint, far-off way; be at least able to carry a brave front, and cast no shadow on her wedded happiness.

But was she happy? Had she, perhaps, been forced to acquiesce, in obedience to her father's wishes? Count Carossa might well prove an importunate suitor, and decline to accept as final her first refusal. Had she been forced against her will to accept him? Or had he really won her heart; and did she now see that the past was but a girlish dream, evanescent, and not wholly sweet? He hardly knew which of these possibilities pained him most; he glanced now at one, now at the other, till the misery of ignorance and suspense almost maddened him. And then, with a pang of the worst pain he had yet felt, a horrible new idea shot through his mind.

There was that vile slander which had been set on foot two years ago, and which still inevitably worked its poisonous way, growing more dangerous with age, as slanders do. Francesca had heard the first rumours, Enrico had told him as much, she herself at Merlebank had half hinted something of the sort. At first she had indignantly refused to credit them, but when the tale was in every one's mouth, why then her very innocence and ignorance of the world would surely make her credit them the more easily; and how ready the Captain would be to believe anything of the sort touching an operatic singer, he realised only too bitterly. More and more as he thought of it this seemed to him the only explanation of the marriage. He could not believe that anything else could possibly have robbed him of Fran-

cesca's love. But if all around her believed him to be not only guilty of such a sin, but to be such a contemptible hypocrite as to have sought his own pleasure under the cover of protecting his sister, might she not possibly have been induced to believe the slander too? And, once believed, such a story must inevitably kill love. For a while he sat rapt in the miserable contemplation of this thought, then suddenly his mind revolted from the idea of any kind of distrust in Francesca. No, it was not possible! She would believe in him against the whole world, would love him for ever, not for any merit in himself, but because of the truth, and purity, and beauty of her own nature. She had been coerced into the marriage with Count Carossa. Again he fell back into the weary round of surmises, rejecting each in turn, but always confronted by the terrible realisation that, however the marriage had been brought about, it was a fact,—a fact which gave the death-blow to his hope, and doomed him to go through life alone.

For he must go on living, and must face the thought at once. Indeed, into his simple, healthy mind no thought of death had entered, though most truly life looked to him desolate enough; but it is in times of great trouble that a good man's real character is tested, and every dull, monotonous day of work in Merlino's Company had added something to his manly steadfastness, and gave him power now to go straight on and do his duty without flinching. He brought back his thoughts with an effort to the present,—*Rigoletto* that evening, the necessity of dining at once, the fear lest his trouble should at all mar the happiness of Sardonì and

Domenica, his best friends, and a resolution to keep the news from them if possible till their wedding was over. With this thought in his mind he turned to the glass, saw that trouble was very legibly stamped on his face, and resolved to dine alone at some restaurant, that he might escape observation. On the staircase he met Anita, she looked up at him in a scared way.

"Do not speak of this to anyone else," he said, in a low voice; "above all, not to Sardoni or Domenica. Let it be only between us two, at any rate till after the wedding."

She promised, although she was far from understanding the motives which prompted the request, and Carlo with a heavy heart passed on, and walked slowly down Broad Street. He remembered, as he walked, the sense of horrible loneliness which had seized him when he walked back from the Strada Nuova to Palazzo Forti, after the *Pilgrim* had sailed from Naples; but that suffering had been light indeed compared to what he was called to bear to-day. It seemed to him now that he was alive and yet dead, that the outer shell of everyday existence would go on in a mechanical way, just as if nothing had happened, but that the heart had been destroyed, and that nothing could ever bring it back to vitality.

In a sort of dream of pain he watched the passers-by, and wondered whether in their careless talk they, too, might be robbing someone of his reputation, and doing the devil's work in the world. A feeling of strong resentment rose up in his mind, he walked more quickly, the colour came back to his face, and his hot, southern blood began to burn and tingle in his veins; if he could

have been suddenly confronted by the unknown being who had set on foot this slander he could have killed him, at least so in his hot indignation he fancied.

Once more Nita's bitter words rang in his ears;—"A legal bar between you and the one you love."

"After all," urged the tempter, "are you not aiming at the impossible? Why should you think of her as his wife when the thought tortures you? What! you mean to allow no thought that you could not lay bare to her sight, or the sight of her husband? Fool! Give up! Is such love as yours to be cramped, and fettered, and starved; love that has lasted all these years?"

"You'll forgive me making bold to stop you, sir," said a familiar voice. He looked round and saw Adamson, the scene-shifter. "I wanted to catch you alone, sir, and at the theatre there be always others within hearing; and I guessed you'd be glad to hear, sir, that it's all come right."

The sudden reaction from the terrible temptation to the story of the honest-looking old man, who had been one of his first friends in the Company taxed his powers to the utmost. His brain seemed to reel, but with an effort he dragged himself back to the recollection of Adamson's trouble. His daughter, a pretty American girl, sang soprano in the chorus, and for some time her father had been very uneasy about her, and Carlo had watched with a good deal of interest the progress of a small drama in which his dresser, Sebastiano, played the part of lover.

"It's all come right, sir," repeated Adamson; "and it's all owing to you. I don't know what you've done

to Sebastiano, sir, but he's kind o' altered. They're agoing to git married right away!"

The need of giving the old man his hearty sympathy restored Carlo to himself. He went into a restaurant and ate his dinner soberly, but in his dark sky there were two gleams of light: the first was the recollection that Nita's heart had been at length reached; the second, that his hopes for Sebastiano had been fulfilled. There came to him, too, the perception that there was still one way in which he might safely serve Francesca. He could pray that her marriage might be a happy one. There was at least that still to be hoped for.

He went back to the Lafayette, found a letter which he had written earlier in the day to Enrico, and added the following brief postscript:—

"Why did you tell me nothing of Count Carossa's marriage? Send me all particulars, if you can, to New York."

More than that he could not bring himself to put even to his friend, but to Clare he wrote a long letter and poured out all his trouble, for she was a woman, and he knew she would understand. Then, relieved a little by this, he took the letters himself to the post, and made his way to the theatre. In Locust Street, close to the stage-door, he met Sardoni, who was much too full of his own affairs to be very observant.

"The day is fixed at last," he said, cheerfully; "it is to be at New York next Sunday week. Will you be my best man, old fellow?"

"Of course I will, Jack, if you wish it," said Carlo. "Does your father come out for the wedding?"

"No; but he has asked us to stay with him in the

autumn, and your letter has evidently done a good deal towards reconciling him to the notion. We owe everything to you, Val."

Carlo turned into his dressing-room, only to be confronted by Sebastiano. He had heard too much of marriages that day, but yet must congratulate his dresser, and, as he put on his jester's costume of red and yellow motley, must listen to the story old Adamson had told him, all over again.

"Why, signore!" exclaimed Sebastiano when he had finished his tale, "see! You have put the red stocking on the left leg instead of the yellow one! One might think that you were in my case!"

Carlo smiled good-naturedly, congratulated the dresser again and dismissed him; but when he was alone he bowed his head on his hands and sat for a long time motionless, overwhelmed by a sense of utter desolation. What was there left to him? Well, there was a certain increasing fame. But, after all, what was that? Success was sweet, and yet in a way it did but make him feel his loneliness the more. Often enough the tears would start to his eyes when he read glowing praise of his artistic work, because he could not help thinking how such things would have pleased his mother. The chief worth of all such recognition is the pleasure it gives to those who love us, and he now stood practically alone in the world; success and fame would be his, but neither father nor mother; neither wife nor child, would be present with him to make them seem worth while.

The voice of the call-boy roused him from his sad thoughts. He wrung his hands together.

"My God, help me!" he groaned.

Then taking up his jester's cap with its gold cock-comb, he made his way to the wings and was soon transformed into the malicious, mocking Rigoletto, playing the part with his customary skill, and receiving with his usual quiet modesty the thunder of applause which rewarded him.

CHAPTER XII.

GENOA.

"Ah, well, the world is discreet;
There are plenty to pause and wait;
But here was a man who set his feet
Sometimes in advance of fate.

"Never rode to the wrong's redressing
A worthier paladin.
Shall he not hear the blessing—
'Good and faithful, enter in?'"

WHITTIER.

A MONTH passed by. In his outer life Carlo went through the series of farewell performances at New York, attended Sardonì's wedding, and travelled back to Italy. In his inner life he fought a terrible battle and came out conqueror.

No further details of Francesca's marriage had as yet reached him to relieve his misery of ignorance and suspense. Apparently both Clare and Enrico shrank from touching on so difficult a subject, and all he had received by way of answer to his letter was a copy of the *Roma* from Enrico, containing the same paragraph which Mlle. de Caisne had enclosed.

The shrewd-looking official, who presided at the *bureau* in the hall of one of the hotels at Genoa, sat speculating to himself as he saw the much-talked-of baritone pass into the breakfast-room on the morning after Merlino's Company had landed in Italy.

There was something about Donati's face which he could not understand: it was not the face one would have expected in a man who, at six-and-twenty, had achieved a striking success, and who was said to be the finest baritone in Europe. Sorrow had not hardened him or soured him, but it had added a sort of depth to his expression, and just now he bore always the look of one who has imposed on himself a strong restraint.

The official was pleased when, on leaving the breakfast-room, Carlo came to the *bureau* to buy some stamps, and he adroitly seized the opportunity to prefer a request.

"Will you write your name in the visitor's book, signore?" he said. "Everyone in the place is looking forward to your appearance to-night, you will see the theatre will be packed from floor to ceiling! Your full name, if you will favour us, signore; the autograph will be valuable."

Carlo smiled a little at the thought that his very commonplace handwriting should be in demand; then, happening to glance up the page at the names of the other visitors, his heart suddenly leapt into his mouth as he read, "Il Conte Carossa, e Contessa Carossa." The names were both apparently written in the Count's writing. He turned quickly to the *concierge*.

"Count Carossa is still in the hotel?"

"Yes, signore; that is to say, he is out just at this moment, but he has taken his rooms for a week. The Contessa is in the *salotto*. I saw her go in just now."

For a moment he hesitated. Francesca was here under the same roof with him! Dared he seek her out? Dared he hear from her own lips the whole truth? When he had landed on the previous evening he had sent off another urgent letter imploring Enrico to write, or, if possible, to come and see him at Genoa, where they had accepted a brief engagement; but now to be told that Francesca was close to him threw him completely off his balance, and an impulse scarcely resistible drove him towards the *salotto*. Should he not enter that room? Should he not see her at least for this once? And yet every throbbing pulse within him warned him not to do so, proved to him beyond dispute that for Francesca's sake and for his own he had far better not seek her out.

With a struggle that seemed to him bitter as death, he forced himself to pass by that closed door, and to go upstairs to his room. He was not left long in peace, for Gigi—who had grown into a very manly little fellow of nearly seven years old, and who had been greatly improved by two years at a good school in New York—came bounding in with an eager request.

"*Zio caro*, don't you remember you promised to take me to Villa Pallavicini this morning? I guess we'll never be likely to get a finer day and I do so drestfully want to see the fountains!"

Though sick at heart, Carlo would not refuse the little fellow's petition, and he dragged himself over to Pegli, trying hard to enter into Gigi's happiness, listening

to his raptures over the beautiful gardens, and smiling politely when their conductor—a wizen, shrewd-looking little man—made time-honoured jokes, and tried to be facetious. Neither the glorious views of sea and mountain, nor the lovely groves of ilex, olive, eucalyptus, and pine trees, nor the glowing colour of the aloes and rhododendrons, could rouse in him that day the slightest pleasure. Gigi chattered merrily as they rowed in a little boat under charge of a broad-shouldered, kindly old boatman through the stalactite cave, and gave a shout of delight when, as they passed on, and came in sight of the fountains, they saw one of the gardeners carrying out the usual practical joke of turning the watering-hose in the direction of some visitors, who fled with good-natured laughter.

“Look, *zio caro!* oh, do look!” cried the child, clapping his hands.

And Carlo, glancing round, saw, only a stone’s-throw from him, on the bank, a little group of visitors, and among them Count Carossa and Francesca.

She did not see him, and, after one long look, he turned away with a sick, dizzy feeling, and knew that he was answering the boatman’s remarks at random, and vaguely wondered whether, after the first shock, that sight would grow more bearable to him.

How he lived through that day he never quite knew, but he had learnt the truth of the words which he had spoken to Anita at Philadelphia that “Nothing is impossible;” and when the evening came, though Sardoni had dined with him, and stayed afterwards talking of Domenica’s perfections, and of his anxiety about his father’s first sight of her, Carlo had betrayed nothing,

but seemed as ready as ever to sympathise with his friend's affairs.

So engrossed was the tenor with his own happiness that he was amazed when, that evening at the theatre, Anita drew him aside, and with tears in her eyes, begged for his advice.

"You are Carlo's friend!" she said, in low, hurried tones; "for God's sake tell me what to do! The Contessa Carossa is sitting in the stalls! Shall I tell Carlo before he goes on?"

Sardoni stared.

"Who, in Heaven's name, may the Contessa Carossa be?" he asked.

"*Insomma!* I forgot you had not been told! He kept it from you because he would not have you troubled at the time of your wedding. She is Francesca Britton, the girl he was to have married! He heard when we were at Philadelphia that she had become the wife of Count Carossa."

Sardoni gave an inarticulate exclamation of rage and regret.

"He must be told!" he said. "A sudden shock like that might make him break down. I will tell him myself!"

Nita thanked him. She was dressed in the coquettish costume of *Carmen*, but for the first time Sardoni noticed a softened look about her face. He saw that she had begun at last really to care for her brother, and that apparently Comerio, who was also engaged at Genoa during the summer season, had not regained his old influence with her. This, however, was but the first night of the engagement,—he wondered greatly whether

her strength would hold out to the end. And then he thought wrathfully of Francesca Britton, and remembered with compunction how he had talked of nothing for the last few weeks but his own happiness; and with regret, and perplexity, and admiration for his friend all mingled, he knocked at the dressing-room door, determined to speak out plainly and prepare his companion for what awaited him.

Carlo had just dismissed Sebastiano, and was fully equipped in the picturesque costume of Escamillo, the Toreador, with its green velvet jacket and knickerbockers faced with gold, broad red-and-gold sash, tan-coloured gaiters, and red flag thrown across the left shoulder. There was no time to be lost, and Sardoni began abruptly.

"I have just been talking to your sister, Val. She thought, and I think, too, that you ought to be prepared beforehand. Count Carossa and his wife are in the theatre."

An exclamation of wonder and dismay escaped Carlo. He began to pace the room in terrible agitation.

"Why did you keep your trouble from me, Val?" said Sardoni, reproachfully. "And what, in Heaven's name, can have made any woman forsake a man like you?"

Carlo turned upon him with a fierce gesture.

"Not one word against her!" he cried. "She was free—quite free! And what am I to deserve her, indeed?—a stage-singer with a tarnished reputation!"

"What! You think, then, it was that slander?" ejaculated Sardoni, understanding better why Carlo had kept all from him during this month.

"I don't know!—I can't tell! For God's sake, Jack, don't talk, or I think I shall go mad!"

Again he walked to and fro, struggling with the thoughts which rushed in wild confusion through his brain. Why did Francesca come to hear him sing? It was so altogether unlike her to do so under the circumstances. Had she come to prove her indifference?—or did she still care for him, and snatch at this chance of seeing him?—or was she too much in awe of her husband to decline to go to the theatre? Each thought seemed to him almost equally intolerable. But time was passing, and he must somehow manage to get himself in hand. As he walked he prayed, and as he prayed he became once more willing to face whatever was sent. For he wasted no time in vain questionings as to why this particular trouble should have come to him, and how it could possibly work for the general good. His strength lay in a habit of taking even the smaller details of life as God's ordering, and in a firm conviction that no man is ever set to do anything that is beyond his strength.

Francesca had married Count Carossa. That being so, he must and could learn to bear the thought. Nothing was impossible!

"Forgive me, dear old fellow, for speaking sharply!" he said, turning back to Sardoni. "After all, Jack, I shall know now if she is happy or not; and if all is well with her, why nothing else matters much."

Sardoni bit his lip; when he could see clearly again he found that Carlo was putting on his Spanish hat, and preparing to go to the wings. He went with him,

choosing a position from which he could watch his friend's entrance and reception.

The part of Escamillo, though small, suited him admirably, nor could any scene have been better chosen for his reappearance in Italy than the picturesque entry of the bull-fighter. Sardoni wondered greatly how the Contessa Carossa felt down there in the stalls, as she watched with the rest the entrance of the torchlight procession, and saw the crowd group itself and look expectantly towards the back of the stage, till, amid a chorus of "Hurrah for brave Escamillo!" the slight, graceful figure in toreador costume advanced through a little lane of torches.

Carlo's fame had preceded him, and the Genoese audience greeted him warmly; he took off his black velvet hat and bowed with the mingled dignity and simplicity of manner which made him at once revered and loved by so many. Then, quickly turning from the homage of the audience to the business of his part, and resuming the bold, genial bearing of Escamillo, he drained the wine-cup handed to him, tossed it across the stage to one of the chorus, and broke forth into the well-known Toreador Song.

His beautiful voice, the vigour of his acting, the imaginative power conveyed by each look and gesture, held the audience spell-bound, and Sardoni marvelled how, under the circumstances, he could sing the refrain of—

"Bear thou in mind, when combat thee elates,
Two bright eyes fondly regard,
For thee a fond heart waits, Toreador."

At the close of the first verse the theatre rang with

shouts of "Bravo." And then once again came the graphic description of the bull-fight, till, by mere gesture and expression, he brought the whole scene vividly before the audience. Most of them had heard *Carmen* before, and had seen the baritone more or less energetically flap his red flag. But Carlo actually made them feel the suspense and excitement of the real contest. He surpassed himself, and when once more the refrain had been sung the whole house rose, and with frantic cheering gave the new baritone an ovation. Not one of the applauders guessed that the song had been to the singer a torturing effort, a mockery almost intolerable; or dreamed how his heart was aching as he stood there acknowledging their thanks. Not till the end did he dare to look towards the place where they had told him Francesca was sitting; but, as he stood close to the footlights, bowing his acknowledgments, he ventured one keen, searching glance; he would, at least, learn if she looked well and happy, would try to gauge the Count's character.

But he had expected too much of himself; all was confusion; he could only see that the Count was frantically applauding him, and that Francesca's eyes were shining and her cheeks glowing. After that brief glance the whole house swam before him, and the only thing for him to do was to get through, as quickly as might be, his brief dialogue with Carmen, and march off amid the greetings of his comrades while the orchestra once more played the Toreador air. The moment he was behind the scenes his brisk, blithe step changed, there was a sort of relief in being able to relax the strain he had put on himself, yet never, even in the first shock

of the news of Francesca's marriage, had he felt such an overwhelming sense of loss and loneliness as now when he had actually seen her sitting beside her husband in the theatre. His first impulse was to lock himself into his dressing-room, but something made him hesitate; if he were alone he should think, and if he thought, he should be lost; the only chance of his being able to keep his faculties clear for the rest of the opera lay in avoiding thought as far as possible. After a minute he forced himself to go to the green-room and to join in the conversation, and there he remained through the interval, till the call-boy summoned him again, and Sebastiano handed him a striped scarf instead of the red one. Flinging it across his shoulder he stepped on to the stage, changed himself with an effort into the Toreador with his careless geniality, received with cool indifference Don José's indignation, and, when challenged to fight, gave a masterly representation of southern passion, springing like a tiger on his foe, and, with drawn knife, fighting desperately. All was speedily over, and again he waited behind the scenes to sing the refrain of the Toreador Song in the distance.

"You look tired, Donati," remarked Caffieri. "Confoundedly hot, isn't it?"

He assented, though all the time he was shivering from head to foot. It was doubly hard to sing those words in cold blood off the stage. But he got through them somehow, and leaning wearily against the wall of the passage waited till the cries of "Donati!" rose to a roar, and then he pulled himself together, crossed the

stage, and stepped out before the curtain to accept the homage which just then meant to him so little.

"What must be borne can be borne," he said to himself again and again; "and at least Francesca is happy."

And now the end of the opera was drawing near, and his part was almost over. Nita watched him with mingled wonder and sympathy as they waited side by side for their last entrance: he was grave and silent, and the chorus from the stage of "Viva Escamillo!" jarred upon him she fancied, yet, though the wistful look in his eyes told plainly of his trouble he was still ready as usual to think of other people.

"There is a horrible draught here!" he exclaimed, "you will take cold, Nita."

And so saying he wrapped his red scarf round her white shoulders, snatching it off again adroitly when they advanced on to the stage. Somehow she had never felt so near to him as at that minute. She knew so well what it was that made him tremble as, with his arm round her, he sang the pathetic little farewell of the Toreador, knew so well what it cost him to utter the words, "If thou lovest me, Carmen, thou shalt smile by-and-by; thou shalt be proud of me."

Together they were just singing their mutual avowal of love, the house was hushed to catch the exquisitely blended voices in the last soft repetition of "Yes, I love thee!" when from the gallery there rose a hoarse cry—the most terrible cry that can be raised in any great gathering—the cry of "Fire!"

With a shriek Nita tore herself away and rushed from the stage, and in one instant it seemed to Carlo

that the whole house was in an uproar. He shouted an assurance that there was no danger; he begged Marioni to go on with the opera; but it was all in vain. Then he stood like a statue in the front of the stage, though all around him his companions were flying, though women were shrieking, though Marioni dragged him by the arm, imploring him to save himself while yet there was time. He shook himself free, and remained gazing down at the seething mass of people in the stalls, spite of all the confusion keeping his eye steadily on Count Carossa and his wife, till at length, with a pang of wrath and astonishment he saw the Count force a way through the crowd for a beautiful fair-haired girl beside him who seemed to be almost fainting with terror, and leave Francesca to take care of herself.

But indignation soon gave place to a thrill of wild exultation. At least it was his part to shield her now,—her husband had left her, and that time which he had thought might possibly come in some dim future had arrived—he might serve her—might, perhaps, save her from death.

He rushed to the side of the stage, leapt down into the deserted orchestra, dashed aside the music-stands which impeded his progress, cleared the barrier at a bound, and, with the agility which was natural to him increased by the fearful excitement, forced his way to Francesca.

“Carlino!” she cried, joy, fear, and relief mingling in her tone as she snatched his hands in hers; “I knew you would come. I couldn’t go with Count Carossa!”

He dropped her hands, perplexed, troubled, utterly

surprised. That Francesca under the circumstances should have spoken thus, seemed to him wholly unlike her. The marriage had been a forced one, undoubtedly, but yet how doubly strange of her to come and hear him that night; how immensely she must have altered to greet him now with such words. Terror must surely have made her forget all else.

"Don't be afraid," he said, very gently, yet with a manner so restrained that she instantly noticed it; "even if this is not wholly a false alarm our best hope of escaping unhurt is just to stay here quietly. See, if you don't mind my holding you like this I think I can prevent your being pushed by the crowd."

"Carlo," she said, quickly, relapsing into English, "are you angry with me?"

"I? How can you ask such a question? I am not angry at all, not in the least."

"I couldn't help it; I couldn't go with the Count, and not know what had happened to you. Are you thinking of what people will say?"

"No, that matters very little. But I fear you did wrong to stay."

"Wrong, when I love you?"

"For God's sake be silent!" he cried, in a voice wrung with pain. "I dare not let you speak such words to me. Let us say no more at all. Perhaps the way will soon be clear, and I can take you back to the Count. I don't understand how he could possibly leave you behind; he is very much to be blamed."

Her eyes were full of tears.

"You must not be vexed with him," she said, falteringly; "it was my doing. I would not go, and it was

right that he should think first of his wife; she was almost fainting."

"His wife!" gasped Carlo. "His wife! Francesca! speak! speak! tell me what you mean!"

His manner terrified her.

"Why, he married Flora Britton, that pretty Scotch cousin of mine; she had been staying with us since her mother's death."

For answer Carlo, regardless of all else, caught her in his arms, and had the panic in the theatre caused their death he would scarcely have murmured, for in that moment of exquisite relief, in that restoration to him of all he thought he had lost, he lived through whole years of rapture.

"My own! my darling! Can you ever forgive me?" he cried.

"I don't understand," sobbed Francesca; "but nothing matters since you love me still; nothing matters now we are together once more."

He thrust his hand impatiently into the toreador costume, and drawing forth an envelope held it towards her.

"I can't tell you," he said; "but look at these, and you will perhaps forgive me."

With blank astonishment she looked at the cutting from the *Times* announcing her own marriage to Count Carossa.

"Ah, who could have done so cruel a thing!" she exclaimed. "This never could have been in the *Times* at all, or, of course, we should have heard of it. Who could have had it printed like this on purpose?"

"I see it now!" said Carlo. "It must have been Comerio's vengeance!"

His wrath was almost swallowed up in the strange perception that began to steal over him of how completely evil had defeated its own ends. Comerio's vengeance had actually been the means of winning for himself Anita's sympathy and love.

"The hymn we sang at Flora's wedding," observed Francesca, "and her monogram 'F. B.' just like mine—how horribly it must all have fitted in! This letter, too!—who wrote it?"

"It is from Mlle. de Caisne; she was engaged at the San Carlo, but I'll never believe that she had anything to do with that false notice. Comerio was singing at the San Carlo, too. He must have induced her to write the account and send the papers, and himself have inserted that thing. I don't like Elise de Caisne, but she would never have lent herself to a fraud like that."

"How horribly the people cry out near the doors!" exclaimed Francesca, able now for the first time to realise a little what was going on round her. "Oh, Carlo! how frightened I should be if you were not here with me!"

The panic had evidently not been without some cause, for clouds of smoke came from the back of the stage, and a strong smell of burning filled the place. It was quite apparent that whatever fire there was must be behind the scenes, but Carlo, with good reason, feared for Francesca the dangers of the crowd far more than the danger of the flames.

They were now almost alone in the stalls, and the

space between them and the stage was perfectly clear, for everyone had fled from the source of danger and rushed to the doors, where a horrible struggle was going on.

"Is Captain Britton in Genoa?" asked Carlo.

"Yes, we are all here in the *Pilgrim*—Uncle George, and Kate, and Clare. Oh, how frightened they will be if they hear of this panic before we get out!"

"Where had they arranged to meet you?"

"Uncle George and father were to call for me at the hotel where Renato and Flora are staying. It was such a chance that I came at all, for you know how little father likes theatre-going. But they came to the yacht this morning, and begged to have me for the day, and said they had taken places for *Carmen*, and father never likes to say 'No,' and so I came, not knowing till we landed that Flora had planned it all on purpose that I should hear you sing."

"They will be terribly anxious about you! Do you think you could be brave enough to walk into this smoke, which is driving everyone else away? I believe we should have a very fair chance of escaping through the orchestra."

"Yes, yes—let us come!" she cried. "I am not afraid of anything with you!"

He wrapped her shawl round her, cleared the way for her towards the orchestra, lifted her over the barrier, and, quickly following himself, advanced cautiously through the smoke-filled passages. Before long he stumbled up against Sardoni.

"You here, Jack!" he exclaimed. "Can we get out? How did it happen?"

"You can get out all right," said Sardoni. "The fire is almost got under; they are working away splendidly with the fire-engines. I was just coming to look for you. How it started no one knows, unless it was from one of the matches flung down when they were smoking in the camp-scene,—and yet I don't see how that can have been. You'll get none of the fun here; come and look at it."

"Not now; Miss Britton's people will be anxious; we must get out as quickly as may be. There is no crowd at the stage-door, I suppose?"

"A fire-engine or two blocking the way, perhaps—nothing worse. But what in Heaven's name has happened, Val?"

He glanced for an instant at the sweet, girlish face, which, not long before, he had watched with indignant wonder,

"Comerio's vengeance!" said Carlo, in a low voice; then, turning back, he said, "Francesca, this is my friend Sardoni, of whom you have often heard."

Francesca shook hands with him warmly.

"And how about Madame Merlino?" she asked. "Is she quite safe?"

"I took her back to the hotel with my wife," said Sardoni; "and I believe on the way back I passed Count Carossa."

"He was obliged to try and get his wife out quickly," explained Francesca. "Oh, I hope Flora wasn't hurt in the crowd! Do let us get back to them!"

"Come with us, Jack, if you don't mind," said Carlo; and together they made their way through the crowded streets to the hotel, which was not far off.

In the entrance-hall they found a number of people clustered round the poor little Contessa, who was lying on the floor quite unconscious, while the Count, who had had his arm broken in the crush round the door of the theatre, received no sympathy at all from Captain Britton, who had just come ashore from the yacht, and was beside himself with anger and anxiety.

"‘She would not come!’" he stormed. "Of course not! An English girl has sense enough not to make for the door in a panic! And you ought to have stayed with her! How dare you take my daughter out, and then forsake her like a——"

Mr. Britton hastily interposed.

"John, don't waste time in talking!" he said. "Let us come round quickly, and see if we can't find her."

"*Gran Dio!*" cried the Count, starting forward, "here she is!"

Captain Britton turned, and saw that Francesca was just entering the hotel, leaning on the arm of an actor gorgeously attired in Spanish costume. It flashed upon him, even at that moment, that it was a strange reversal of things which should bring him to scold a Count for his desertion and to thank an opera-singer for rescuing his daughter.

"My dear, dear child!" he exclaimed, bending down to kiss her; "we have only just heard of the fire—we have been terribly anxious about you! You are not hurt?"

"Not a bit!" said Francesca. "Carlo made me stay quite still, and then helped me out through the orchestra and by the stage-door——"

"Carlo!" exclaimed Captain Britton, in amazement.

And, glancing round, he saw that the "Toreador" was shaking hands with Mr. Britton, and answering as best he might the torrent of questions which assailed him on all sides.

"It is Signor Donati, the new baritone, of whom all the world speaks!" said one of the little crowd. "*Via!* I tell you I should know him anywhere. The shops are full of his photographs."

"And he has saved the pretty Signorina from the fire!" exclaimed another.

Captain Britton, forgetting for once in his genuine glow of emotion that many eyes were watching him, drew near to the hero of the evening.

"Carlo, my dear boy!" he exclaimed, seizing his hand in a hearty grip; "I can never thank you enough—never!"

Something in his throat choked him, and Mr. Britton, having suggested that rumours might possibly have reached the *Pilgrim*, and that Clare and Kate might be anxious, he quickly availed himself of the chance of escaping from so trying a scene, and, with a parting shake of the hand, and a "To-morrow!" spoken *sotto voce*, which conveyed much to Carlo, he drew his daughter's arm within his, and led her away from the hotel.

CHAPTER XIII.

YACHTING.

"Let us be like the bird for a moment perched
On a frail branch while he sings,
Though he feels it bend yet he sings his song,
For he knows he has his wings."

VICTOR HUGO.

"You look pale, Nita; I am afraid the fright of last night has done you harm," said Carlo, coming into the Merlino's private sitting-room the next morning. "It is just as well that the damage done to the theatre will prevent our keeping this engagement. They say the place is to be closed for a fortnight, and after the horrors that went on in the crush last night it is only decent."

"The wonder is that more were not killed," said Nita, with a shudder. "Oh, I am so glad not to have to sing again to-night; I should always be hearing again that horrible cry."

"Do not dwell on it, think of something else, it has made you look quite ill," said Carlo, debating whether he should talk to her of his own happiness, but coming to the conclusion that she seemed too sad, and that it would be better not to touch on the subject.

"It is not the fright that has made me ill," she said at length. "I must tell you, Carlino, all about it. Comerio has been here."

"Here this morning!" he exclaimed.

"Yes," she shivered from head to foot, "and I made him own that Mlle. de Caisne knew nothing of that

advertisement. He got her to write the letter easily enough, for you know she was vexed with you, and he made her believe that it was Miss Flora Britton whom you were in love with, and then he posted the letter for her, and put in the cutting from the *Times*. Just think of his boasting to me of the cleverness of the trick!"

Carlo, with a muttered ejaculation, paced hurriedly to and fro, trying to keep his indignation within bounds.

"He told me how he had got it printed," she continued, "and expected me to praise him for it."

"And you?" asked Carlo, with dawning hope in his tone.

"I told him that I would never speak to him again," said Nita, trying in vain to repress a sob. "But, Carlino, I am afraid of him, so terribly afraid. He looked as if he could have killed me, and just went away without another word. Oh, if only I had never seen him! If only I had believed, like you, that nothing is impossible, and had resisted from the first! But he was always so strong, and I so weak and friendless."

"But you have resisted now," said Carlo, trying to comfort her. "And as to fearing what he may do, I would try not to trouble about it, for, depend upon it, he values his own safety too much to do anything desperate; besides, if evil is strong, good is more strong."

"It doesn't seem to be in this world, at any rate," said Nita.

"Do you think not? Perhaps it doesn't always conquer here at first, but that matters little if in the end it wins."

"You will not leave me?" she pleaded. "If you

leave the Company my last chance is gone. Ah, do you remember how I hoped at Birmingham that you would go, and that Comerio would take your place? If he had spent those two years in America with us I should have been in his power now."

She shuddered, for something had shown her that morning the true nature of the man whom she had loved.

"I will never leave you," he said, quietly.

Through those three years of lonely work he had struggled on, bearing Nita's selfish indifference, her fits of perverse ill-nature, and not daring to look on to the future. Now the change had come upon him so suddenly that he was almost overpowered by it. He had reaped the reward which can only come to those who live by the day; having toiled faithfully through the darkness, he emerged suddenly into a flood of glorious sunshine.

"An English gentleman to see you, Signore, in the *salotto*," announced a waiter.

Carlo's heart beat quickly as he went downstairs, yet he was less embarrassed than Captain Britton, who met him with an overpowering shake of the hand, and then relapsed into silence.

"Francesca is none the worse for the fright, I hope?" asked Carlo, anxiously.

"Indeed, I think she is all the better for it," said the Captain, smiling a little.

There was another silence.

"The fact is, Donati," resumed Captain Britton, dragging his chair forward with a business-like air, and planting both elbows on the table; "there is no use in beating about the bush: I have come here to ask you

a plain question, and I hope you'll give me a plain answer. Do you still care for my child or not? Just answer me yes or no."

The bluff speech of the old sailor nearly took away the Italian's breath, but if Captain Britton really expected him to answer in a monosyllable to such a question he was disappointed.

His face glowed, his eyes shone, yet, spite of the passionate eagerness of his tone, there was a dignity in his manner which appealed to the Englishman.

"I love her, sir, with my whole heart!" he said. "I love her, and must always love her. We belong to each other, and though we may have to go through life apart, yet she is mine and I am hers, and nothing can come between us."

"So it seems," said the Captain, rather ruefully. "Well, I frankly tell you that I would rather see my daughter married to a plain working-man than to an opera-singer; but I have talked the matter over with my brother and Miss Claremont, and since your love has stood the test of a three-years absence, and since Francesca will not lend an ear to any other proposals, I am bound to consider what is most for her happiness, though I can't candidly tell you that it is such a match as I should have chosen for her."

"Indeed," exclaimed Carlo, with a lover's genuine humility; "I know I can never deserve her, but——"

"Nonsense," interrupted the Captain; "I meant nothing personal of that sort! You know well enough, Carlo, that I am very fond of you, that I can never forget that you saved her life——" He began to feel choked, and broke off abruptly.

"As to that," said Carlo, smiling, "it was nothing at all. We only sat still when others were running away, and I really think we forgot fire and danger altogether at first."

"Let us speak out plainly once for all," said Captain Britton, clearing his throat, "and then have done with it altogether. I dislike your profession, but I understand that you have a great future before you in the musical world, and I suppose nature meant you for an opera-singer, and that there is no use in running one's head any longer against a stone wall. After all, a man need not be affected by his work, and perhaps dramatic talent was meant to be used. I don't deny that there's something in that argument. And the great thing is that the stage doesn't seem to have spoilt you, and that I know you'll make my child a good husband."

Between his rapture of happiness, his anxiety not to irritate the Englishman by allowing his feelings to appear too plainly, and his dazzling visions of the future, Carlo found his powers taxed to the utmost. But with an effort he forced himself to enter into a sober discussion of the case, recalled to Captain Britton's memory the fact that Uncle Guido's inheritance had gladdened the hearts of the Little Sisters of the Poor, and then told him plainly just how matters stood with regard to Anita.

The Captain was touched by his simple yet very graphic way of telling a story. He began faintly to perceive the rare beauty of his character.

"You are going to Naples now, at once, did I understand?" he asked, when at length Carlo paused.

"We thought of going there now, since the theatre

will be closed after this panic, and our engagement at the San Carlo will soon be beginning. My brother-in-law is going to take a fortnight at the baths at Lucca, for he has not been well lately. I shall go home to Naples with Nita and her little boy."

"Then come with us in the *Pilgrim*," said the Captain. "My brother begged that you would do so, and Sibyl will be enchanted to have the little boy as a playmate."

After Nita had been consulted, and the matter had been a little more discussed, the invitation was accepted, and by the evening a general dispersion had taken place. Merlino had gone off to his course of baths; Sardoni and Domenica had started joyfully on what they called their second wedding tour to the Italian lakes; Carlo, Nita, and Gigi, were welcomed on board the *Pilgrim*; and, in advance of all, Comerio, with hatred in his heart, was making the best of his way to Corsica.

Although, as Carlo had observed when he first set foot on the yacht years ago, the *Pilgrim* was not at all a place for talking secrets, yet the lovers were somehow well content, and enjoyed to the full those happy days of reunion. The rest of the party had a kind way of playing whist in the saloon when it grew dark; and as to the man at the wheel they were quite untroubled by his presence, nor disturbed themselves at all about the watch, who discreetly kept to the fore-castle end, and no doubt found plenty to say among themselves as to the betrothal, which was now an acknowledged fact.

"It is almost too good to seem true," said Carlo one evening, as they sat together under the square-sail

which was spread to catch the light summer wind. On one side they could see the dark Italian coast, on the other the beautiful outline of the mountains in Elba, while the moon made an ever-shifting track of light on the sea as they glided gently on, and the red light from the port side cast a ruddy glow on the white sail towering above them. "How little I thought," he added, "of having such a home-coming."

"Yes," said Francesca; "and that it should have been in the dear old *Pilgrim*! How strange that is! I used to be so miserable here three years ago, and now it does seem, as you say, almost too good to be true."

And the same happy faculty for living in the present, which had stood Carlo in good stead through his years of trouble, helped now to make his happiness perfect. No lurking fear of Comerio spoilt those cloudless days, no anxieties as to Nita's future, no troubles as to money matters. Marriage seemed still a far-away prospect, but they were betrothed, and there could never again be between them that wearing separation, that maddening dependence on outsiders for the least news of each other.

"I had heard nothing of you for two months," said Francesca, as again, to make their present brighter by contrast, they talked over the troubles of the past; "but that was better than having false news. You have had the hardest part, darling, and yet you'll never know how bitter it was to me in one way."

"What way?" he asked, tenderly.

"I couldn't tell you at Merlebank, but it was knowing that you were so poor, and having money myself,

and not being able to help you. Ah! you'll never know how hard it was to be able to give to anyone in the world except to the one you loved best. There is a little matter-of-fact bit in *Aurora Leigh* which I used to say for comfort."

"What was that? Say it to me now."

"Let us be content in work,
To do the thing we can, and not presume
To fret because it's little."

"I did fret, though, for, after all, we are most of us like *Alice in Wonderland*,—very fond of giving ourselves good advice, but seldom taking it!"

They laughed a little, and now it was the trouble that seemed like a dream, and the happiness that had become true, and real, and indisputable. And together they paced the quiet deck, while below Nita's sweet, clear voice sang the familiar air of "*Oh, dolce Napoli*," which Francesca loved because of its happy associations.

"See Naples and die!" said Carlo, smiling. "I often thought, over in America, that I would gladly have done so; but now I think not, *Carina*, much as I love it. Let us hope people in real life don't die of joy."

CHAPTER XIV.

A FINAL CHOICE.

"So oft the doing of God's Will
Our foolish wills undoeth!
And yet what idle dream breaks ill
Which Morning Light subdueth?
And who would murmur and misdoubt
When God's great Sunrise finds him out?"
E. B. BROWNING.

"AND so, after all, you have overcome the British prejudice and have only managed to lose your fortune!" exclaimed Enrico Ritter, looking his friend in the face with a critical air. "It seems that you have got back your health again, too. Upon my word, I think knight-errantry is a profitable calling, always supposing you haven't a cantankerous relative to cut you off with a shilling. I shall think of taking to it myself soon."

Carlo had landed at Naples late on the previous evening, and now, after the mid-day breakfast with the Ritter household and a long talk with his old friend, was making his way back to the Palazzo Forti in the cool of the afternoon. He was in the best of spirits, and had just been giving Enrico the account of all that had passed during the last few weeks.

"You still set up for being an egoist, I see," he replied, with a laugh.

"Well, every man must have his theory of the universe," said Enrico, with a mischievous side-glance at his friend. "Ah! by-the-by, you should shake your fist at that house over there on the right; it belongs to

the Little Sisters of the Poor, and ate up all your money."

"I should have been glad enough of some of it in America," said Carlo, with a smile. "However, no doubt our poor Neapolitans wanted it quite as badly. Oh, wait! how fast you walk! Let us stop and see the view from this terrace just for half-a-minute—dear old Capri again, how natural it looks! You would laugh if you knew how homesick I have been over in the New World."

"I must make a note of that," said Enrico. "In my future knight-errantry I'll take good care to keep in Italy."

And so, with laughter and friendly teasing, they walked through the busy streets until they came in sight of the dingy old palazzo, at the door of which an ostler was holding a beautiful cream-coloured horse.

"Come in and see Anita," said Carlo; "she will have had her *siesta* by this time."

And Enrico, though he detested Madame Merlino, consented to go in to please his friend, and made himself very amiable to her while Carlo opened a telegram which had arrived for him during his absence.

The message was sent from Pozzuoli by Captain Britton, and was to this effect,—

"We hope you will dine with us to-night. I have ordered a horse to be sent round for you. Do not fail us."

"Nita, should you mind if I went to Casa Bella?" he asked. "The Captain seems to want me over there, for he has even taken the trouble to send a horse for me. I will be back, of course, to-night."

"If that was the horse we saw waiting outside you will get there in no time," said Enrico; "it beats your old Arab."

But this Carlo would not allow, and amid much lively discussion as to his old favourite, he nodded a farewell to Nita and Gigi, and ran downstairs, his heart beating fast at the prospect of seeing Francesca again so soon.

"*Auf Wiedersehn!*" said Enrico, as he watched his friend ride away. And the bright look and gesture in response kept recurring to him as he walked back to his office.

"What in the world is that fellow made of!" he said to himself. "He is for ever upsetting all my calculations and disturbing my pet theories. He even seems to have roused up that heartless, insipid Anita; for the first time I actually saw a kind of likeness between them. One could at least tell that they were brother and sister."

To be once again on the familiar road to Pozzuoli made Carlo's heart glow within him. Every tree, every house, seemed like an old friend; his eye noted each slight change wrought during the three years of absence, while his mind recalled the past with little but a tender remembrance of the bygone happiness. As he drew near to the grotto of Posilipo he instinctively slackened his pace a little, glancing up with eyes full of glad recognition at the lovely hillside, with its tangled growth of birch, and pine, and cactus, clustering about the place which is supposed to be the tomb of Virgil.

It was at this moment that a close carriage drove quickly past him; he would have taken no particular

notice of it had he not, with his keen and practised observation, noted even in the brief moment of passing the remarkably fine eyes of one of the occupants. Where had he seen them before? Both the eyes and the searching glance seemed familiar to him, and racking his memory he at length brought back a mental picture of a water-seller's stall, and of a young man of strong and sinewy frame, who had arrested his attention last night by a certain picturesqueness of attitude as he stood watching the crowd glass in hand; for an instant they had looked full at each other, and the piercing glance of the stranger had lingered in his memory, and he had thought to himself as he passed on that even in Italy one did not often encounter such splendid eyes.

Entering the lofty archway of the grotto he passed on into the dark tunnel, which seemed to him more than ever like the long nave of some vast cathedral, the lights gleaming at intervals making the surrounding gloom only more apparent. He smiled a little to himself at the recollection of sundry boyish terrors never confessed to any living creature and never given way to; he remembered how, now and then on his way home from Naples, there had been times when the horrible feeling of an unknown "something" waiting to spring out upon him from the darkness had set his heart beating fast, and had made him resort in desperation to a Paternoster; and he acknowledged to himself that there was perhaps some slight excuse for those past terrors, since, after all, the grotto was an eerie place, and the road, even at this hour in the afternoon, lonely enough.

But recollections of old times began to give place

to the absorbing consciousness that he was on his way to Francesca, and as he left the dimly lighted tunnel behind him and emerged into the dust and the afternoon sunshine, he fell into a happy reverie. He was to see her again, and she was his, and the trouble was all over, and the separation ended, and life was so bright that already those weary years seemed to him like a dream and the glad anticipation like a return to real waking existence.

She would be waiting for him at the gate of Casa Bella, and they would go once more to the old belvedere where he had first told her of his love; he would make her stand once more under the datura tree where she had stood long ago when the trouble was just beginning to darken on the horizon, and he should see her now again as he had seen her so often in his dreams, with the creamy flowers drooping down over her dusky hair and her eyes shining into his.

He smiled to himself with the rapture of the thought, and touched up his horse, grudging every moment that kept him from his love.

He had ridden about two miles beyond the grotto and had nearly reached the cross road which leads towards Agnano, when he was roused from his dream of happiness by his horse shying violently at the sudden apparition of a man rushing across the road. All his attention was needed to quiet the animal, and it was only when he found himself surrounded by four formidable-looking ruffians that he realised another danger. There was just time for him to give his horse a smart stroke over the shoulder which made it bound forward, but the effort was useless, for one of his as-

sailants instantly caught the reins in a firm grip and the next moment he was dragged from his seat. With all his might he struggled to free himself, but it was only for a minute or two that he could even keep his footing; a hand held his throat so tightly that to cry out for help was impossible, to breathe at all difficult, and, though he fought gallantly, and by adroitness and agility rather than strength, managed to give his captors some trouble, it was inevitable that he should succumb. Bruised, shaken, half choked by the relentless grip on his throat, he at length felt his strength overborne, and struggling to the end, was forced down on to the dusty road. Then came a moment's breathing-space, for the hand at his throat relaxed its hold and another and a coarser hand was substituted for it. One of the men broke the silence, speaking in a low, hurried voice,—

“Now then, Lionbruno, the blow—quick!”

To move was impossible. Three powerful men held him down in the dust, a fourth was apparently told off to murder him. He had time for only two thoughts—Comerio's vengeance and Francesca's grief; and the pang of this last thought was so terrible that the prompt blow on the head which put an end to consciousness was, perhaps, more merciful than preparation or delay.

When he came to himself he remembered nothing that had passed, but awoke to a consciousness of intense physical misery. He gasped for breath and became aware that his mouth was tightly bandaged; there was, moreover, a covering over his face—perhaps a shroud! and in the horror of that thought he instinctively tried to raise his hand and make feeling supply the place of sight, but he found that his arms were tightly

strapped to his sides. Restored still further to life by the mere astonishment and dismay, he perceived that he was in a carriage which was being driven rapidly along a rather rough road, his head ached terribly and felt heavy and confused, and he was sinking back into a sort of stupor and vaguely wondering how long he should have to bear the pain of the jolting vehicle, when the silence was broken by a voice near him.

"*Per Dio!* who would have thought such a small-made man would have given us so much trouble!"

"He fought so well that our courteous Lionbruno was in fifty minds about knocking him on the head," said another speaker, sarcastically.

"*Accidente!*" broke in a much younger voice; "nothing of the sort, I tell you. Comerio has had to pay a good price for his pretty prima donna, but he has not given us a *lira* too much for this business,—it was a risky thing in full daylight. *Sacramento!* the fellow is coming to himself!"

The mention of Comerio's name had brought back everything to Carlo's remembrance, and the intolerable words which followed filled him with an anguish which, for the time, made the physical pain non-existent. He started forward, found his feet unfettered, and began to writhe and struggle in a vain effort to free his arms. Instantly strong hands forced him down again, and heavy boots kicked his shins into unwilling stillness.

"Be so good as to use your common-sense, signore!" said the young voice at his elbow. "You are our prisoner, and wholly at our mercy. Your life is in no danger at present, but if you resist we shall put an end to you to save ourselves trouble."

"Bravo! bravo!" cried another voice, stifling a laugh. "Lionbruno is such an orator that we shall soon have him as a Deputy, and then he can travel free of cost!"

There was a little more stifled laughter, then silence again, broken only by the sound of the horses' hoofs and the rumbling of the wheels.

Terrible thoughts rushed through Carlo's mind. He saw Anita at the mercy of Comerio, her husband away, Sardoni out of reach, himself altogether powerless. The intolerable realisation of his own helplessness almost maddened him, and his brain, still confused by the stunning blow, refused to be controlled. If he could have seen with his eyes—if he could have asked one question—if he could have freed his arms from the cords which bound them,—the horrible suspense and anxiety would have been more bearable; but he was, as his captor had said, wholly at the mercy of others, and the perception of this made him beside himself. It was the same struggle magnified a thousand-fold which he had passed through at the time of his illness—for a man the hardest struggle possible,—to endure an unnatural and undeserved restraint, to be altogether helpless while conscious of strength, and knowing that for that strength there is a terrible demand. Such burning wrath consumed him, such uncontrollable resentment, that it was, perhaps, well for him that action was impossible, or with the blind impulse of a confused brain and a despairing heart he might have done some rash deed which, in a cooler moment, he would bitterly repent.

At length the carriage stopped, and Carlo was

dragged out. The rough handling made him tingle from head to foot, and with all his might he resisted, for he knew that at present he stood on a road where there was at least a possibility of meeting with help, and to what these brigands were hurrying him he had no idea.

"No use, signore!" said the voice at his side. "We are four to one, and you only make matters worse for yourself."

Something in the tone of the speaker appealed to Carlo. His blood cooled a little, and he allowed himself to be led through what he felt sure must be a thick wood, for he could hear the rustle of leaves as they forced their way on, and could feel boughs brushing against him. As to the distance they walked, he could not form the slightest idea. It seemed to him as if the journey would never end, and his assailants were evidently in a hurry, for, spite of the rough, uneven ground, they went at a sharp pace, and when exhaustion made him hang back a little, he found himself impatiently urged on by Lionbruno, who, throughout the walk, grasped his arm, while the men who brought up the rear pushed, kicked, and hustled him at every opportunity.

At last he was so worn out that it was all he could do to drag one foot after the other, the craving for air and light became more and more keen, and had it not been for the iron grasp in which he was held he would have fallen to the ground. A sort of dull comfort in the thought that it must sooner or later end was his only relief,—and presently the way became clearer, he heard other voices, and felt other men approaching

him. Someone tore off the bandages which had kept him blind and dumb for so long, and then, dazzled and confused, he looked round.

He found himself in a domed building, which seemed to him a smaller edition of the old Roman bath at Baja, known as the Temple of Mercury. It was lighted only by two torches, which however, shed a pretty strong light on the strange group beneath. Half-a-dozen rough, ill-clad men were clustered together close to a stone bench, on which was seated the leader of the gang, a powerful-looking man, whose rugged face and uncompromising mouth instantly checked all the hope that rose in Carlo's heart when he found himself capable once more of seeing and speaking.

Brancaleone was not at all the ferocious and cruel-looking brigand chief of his boyish fancies; he was much more like an officer of the martinet type, but his face was as hard as a rock, and he was evidently a person from whom no quarter was to be expected.

"Successful, you see, in my first enterprise, *padre mio!*" said the young fellow who had been addressed as Lionbruno.

Carlo looked at him, and saw that he could not have been more than eighteen at the outside. Undoubtedly he was the same picturesque figure whom he had noticed yesterday by the water-seller's stall; and now, as he stood beside the chief, bowing respectfully yet speaking with the freedom of a son, the likeness between the two faces was quite noticeable. In twenty years time, if he lived the same lawless life, the young face would be probably an exact reproduction of the old.

Brancalone turned his haughty gaze upon the prisoner.

"Your name, signore?" he inquired.

"I am Carlo Poerio Donati," he replied. "For what purpose have you brought me here? If money is your object, I am as poor as any man in Naples."

The chief did not answer, but ordered one of the banditti to search the prisoner. The man obeyed, and handed the contents of Carlo's pockets to the leader, who at once singled out the watch and chain and handed them to Lionbruno.

"This is your share, my son; you have done well," he remarked.

The rest of the things he pushed collectively towards the three men who had helped in the capture; they snatched eagerly at the purse, and grumbled much to find so little money in it.

Meanwhile Carlo stood motionless. Sometimes it seemed to him that the whole scene must be some wild imagination of his own brain. Had he, perhaps, been so overwrought by the hurrying griefs and joys of the past few weeks that his mind had become deranged? Or was he asleep, and was it all a dream arising out of some confused recollections of the struggling he had witnessed in the panic, and fantastically blended with the gipsy camp scene in *Carmen*? A horrible giddiness seized him—the result, probably, of the blow he had received and the exhausting walk which had followed. He staggered a little, but recovered himself, and once more turned to the chief with the same question,—

"For what purpose have you brought me here?"

"You bear a name, signore, that I once revered,"

said the chief, coldly; "and for the sake of that I will answer you, though I am not usually questioned by my prisoners. You come here to replenish my purse. There are those who were willing to pay well for my son's little escapade, and your stay here will be quite free of cost to yourself."

"I will double the sum if you will release me at once!" exclaimed Carlo.

But the chief shook his head.

"In the words of the proverb, signore, '*È meglio aver oggi un uovo che dimani una gallina*,' nor do I ever turn from my word. Rocco, make haste with the irons!"

Again that horrible giddy confusion rose in Carlo's brain; he was very dimly aware of what happened during the next few minutes; but the paroxysm passed, and he found that they were leading him through a catacomb, and that Lionbruno, torch in hand, headed the procession. The passage ended in a sort of rude cell, which showed signs of habitation, and here his guards left him, with Lionbruno only as sentinel. He noticed that his arms had been unstrapped, but that there was a chain round his waist to which one foot and one hand were attached, and the weight of iron was so great that he could only move with difficulty. He remembered that Poerio himself had worn such fetters for years, and again the dream-like feeling crept over him. He could hardly persuade himself that he was actually Carlo Donati, the singer, living in the peaceful days of King Humbert.

Meanwhile, the son of the chief was regarding the first prisoner for whose capture he was responsible with

something like embarrassment. He had expected on the part of his victim an abject terror, a piteous appeal for mercy, which would effectually have steeled his heart against him, which would have genuinely pleased his pride, and made opportunities for cruelty delightful. But now that he had got his wish, and with exceptional coolness and daring had kidnapped his man in broad daylight and within a few miles of Naples, he found, much to his disgust, that, far from feeling himself a hero, he had a vague sense of discomfort and shame for which he could not in the least account.

"You still feel the effects of the blow, signore?" he inquired, pushing together with his foot the shavings which had accumulated about a carpenter's bench that stood in a corner of the cell. "You had better lie down and rest." He made a gesture towards the pile of shavings, wondering greatly at himself as he did so.

Carlo, however, took no heed of the suggestion; instead, he drew nearer to his gaoler.

"I am your prisoner," he said, gravely, "and wholly at your mercy, as you reminded me just now; but we are fellow-men. Do not keep me any longer in the dark! Tell me what Comerio means to do!"

"What is that to us?" replied Lionbruno. "For the present our share of the work is done, and for the rest who cares? In any case Brancalone will get his money. As for your fate, I don't care a fig about it one way or the other!"

"You are more of a man and less of a brute than you would have me think," replied Carlo; "but it is not of my fate I ask. Tell me what Comerio means to do! I know that he is at the bottom of this plot; I should

have known it even had I not heard your words in the carriage!"

"So you did hear them? And that was what made you fight again for your freedom? Take my advice, signore, and do not ask too many questions. *Corpo di Bacco!* Must you, then, hear all? Well, in two days' time you will have your limbs freed from those irons, or, if not, why, your soul will be freed from your body, which comes to the same thing in the end!"

"Can you not speak plainly? Do you mean that my life depends on Comerio's whim?"

"Not on Comerio at all, but on your sister. Look here, it is all as orderly as a ceremony on a *festa!* Comerio goes to her to-night, wins her consent to leave the country with him, and exchanges a white handkerchief with our Neapolitan agent, who on Wednesday night will pass it on to us, and from that moment you are a free man once more. Or, on the other hand, Madame Merlino refuses her lover's suggestion definitely, Comerio disappears from the scene, having dropped a red handkerchief with our agent, and on Thursday you look your last on this world. That is the matter in a nutshell, signore."

Carlo's heart gave a bound, then a cold chill ran through him; he had indeed grown pretty well accustomed to the idea of possible violence at the hands of Comerio; he knew the Corsican's nature too well to expect him to behave, for instance, like an Englishman or an American; but, although he had never been lacking in courage, it appalled him to think that for two days and two nights he must wait in this dismal cell, and at the end of the time be murdered in cold blood.

Yet what was the other alternative? Either Anita must live in sin, or he must die—there was no escape from the dilemma! To desire his own life meant that he desired her moral death; to pray for his own safe-keeping meant that he prayed for her ruin. And yet he clung to life with the strong natural instinct of a healthy man. Only a few weeks ago all had been hard and dreary for him; but now, with Francesca his own once more, with the prospect of fame sweetened by her loving sympathy, with health and vigour, and all the ardent desires of youth, how was it possible for him to be willing to be done to death in this dismal catacomb?

After all, under the circumstances, would it be such a sin on Anita's part? Was not Merlino ill-tempered enough to excuse such a step? Were not his own notions about marriage old-fashioned as Sardoni had always declared? Thoughts such as these just glanced through his mind, yet gave him but a momentary struggle, because the life he had lived for the last three years made him on this point practically invulnerable. The real anguish lay in the temptation to put Francesca above everything—above his conscience, above his sense of honour and duty. How could he desire that which must condemn her to grief and loneliness, which must cause her the most cruel of shocks and blight her whole life? It was the old, old story of the innocent suffering for the guilty, of the strong bearing the burden of the weak, and his mind revolted from the thought of sorrow visiting the woman he loved best; he turned in horror from the apparent injustice of the law of life.

But while he lay there face downwards on the heap of shavings in dumb, hopeless anguish, there came to him all at once the strongest consciousness that, although he was chained, fettered, and guarded,—a most helpless prisoner, not even knowing where his underground cell could be, yet that in his keeping lay Anita's fate. He knew, as he knew the fact of his own existence, that if he could not bring his will to accept this thought of being murdered, neither would she allow herself to be saved from wrong-doing at the expense of his life. At this very moment she, too, was probably wrestling with deadly temptation. Her love for him so lately awakened would impel her to save him at all costs, while Comerio's power over her would be increased tenfold by this devilish scheme which had been so cunningly laid. Clearly the Corsican was determined to win her, while, for the time, Carlo had staggered under the blow dealt him by his enemy, and was pausing, as men must, to look the evil in the face, to count the cost as they are distinctly told to do, that so they may be ready for the worst.

Anita was even now making her final choice. Whatever the scientific or spiritual explanation of the matter might be, he knew that there was between them some direct power of influence, some will-force, which made her decision depend on his actual readiness for sacrifice. It was clearly impossible that she should be saved by a figment of the imagination—a mere belief in his readiness. He must definitely desire that she might be saved from Comerio, cost him what it would, before she could be so influenced by his devotion as to choose what was really right. It must be a

living fact, not a hazy illusion, which would save his sister.

And yet how could he desire that which would bring bitter grief to Francesca, disappointment to all his hopes of work in the world, a sudden end to his career? It would not even be a beautiful and glorious death like his father's or his grandfather's, but a miserable end like some animal in a slaughter-house, a horrible, degrading death in a den of robbers without a single friend to comfort him, without one farewell to those he loved! And with that the tears started to his eyes, for he saw once more the carriage just outside the arsenal gates, he remembered how Francesca had smiled at him for the last time when he parted from her on leaving the yacht, and recalled the bright hope which had thrilled in her voice as she spoke that *A rivederci!*

"My God!" he cried, "how can I be willing to die! It is more than man can bear!"

Choking with emotion, and with a craving for air, he raised himself a little, turning his face instinctively towards the light.

Apparently Lionbruno added to his character of brigand the more peaceful callings of carpenter and carver, and by some curious irony of fate his carvings were almost all of them ecclesiastical; in this secret retreat of banditti were to be found delicately-carved alms-boxes, destined for some rich cathedral or church; beautifully designed rosaries, which might some day find a home in the private oratory of a wealthy noble; and crosses by the dozen, because for them the market was always good. Carlo was so much accustomed to

observe things carefully, that he instinctively took in all these little details, spite of his grievous trouble. Lionbruno had set up a couple of torches in a carved sconce, had lighted a small lamp with a tin reflector, and, seated on a stool beneath it, was working with apparent laziness, but with wonderful effect, on a crucifix. For some minutes Carlo watched in silence the carving of one of the pierced hands, then a flood of light suddenly overpowered his darkness. Was it more than a man could bear, this that had come to him?

He could not submit, no healthy human nature could submit, to objectless pain or needless sacrifice; but could not he, too, seek only to do God's will and quietly take the consequences, facing world, and flesh, and devil, as the Divine Man had done in the strength of dauntless faith?

Yes, he felt that it was possible. There was in the very depths of his being something upon which he could at will fall back, a strength infinitely greater than this craving for the joys of life, and love, and freedom; stronger, too, than that side of his love for Francesca, which made him tremble at the thought of her grief and loneliness.

Carlo was no theologian, probably he could not have put into many-syllabled terms his own firm belief, but he had the insight of a pure heart and the vigour of one who has always tried to conquer his own weaknesses. In a very simple and literal way he believed that God was his Father, not in name only, but in very truth. He knew that he, in common with every human being, had it in his power to live as a son or as an

alien; and he knew, by that most sure proof, the experience of daily life, that he could only overcome the cravings of selfishness, by a constant effort to come into closer union with that life-giving Spirit to whom he was truly akin, that so his spirit might not starve, but grow and develop.

The confusion, caused by physical weakness, and the shock of finding himself at the mercy of the merciless, began to fade, as he realised the strength of that wisdom, and love, and peace, which reigns above all the sin of the world, and which is, in truth, "taking it away" by the eternal power of love and sacrifice. He felt a sort of surprise that only a few minutes ago the struggle within him had been so desperate, the revolt against his fate so vehement. After all, what did it matter if, for a time, evil seemed to triumph and might seemed to conquer right? Had it not always seemed to be so since the beginning of the world? And yet had not good steadily advanced, triumphing through apparent defeat? Above all the anguish of his grief, and pain, and loss, there came to him, as there had often come during those three years, a wonderful happiness, the pure delight of realising the perfect will of God, and with his whole heart trying to do it.

Looked at through this other atmosphere, the future seemed less formidable to meet, though not one whit less important. A wave of horror passed over him as he realised what might be happening at that very moment, and all thought of self died within him as, in terrible reaction, he passed from the vision of perfect Purity and Love to the thought of impurity and sin. In an agony he prayed, willing now to die a thousand

deaths rather than that Anita should sink into this black abyss, this hellish contradiction to all love and light.

It mattered nothing to him that many would consider his adhesion to Christ's law as to marriage mere old-fashioned prejudice; it mattered nothing to him that the worldly-wise would say he was throwing away his life for the sake of keeping his sister from the infringement of a conventional law. He knew that it was not so. For since it is the pure in heart who see God, it is also the pure in heart who intuitively shrink from evil, and realise without analysing the hatefulness of impurity.

So the night hours passed by, and he prayed unceasingly for Nita's safety.

It was not till morning that the thought of his own position returned to him.

"This must be Tuesday," he reflected, as he rose from his rough bed. "To-morrow I shall die."

But the thought had lost its bitterness, for, after all, death would mean victory.

CHAPTER XV.

"ALL GOETH BUT GOD'S WILL."

"Whatso it be, howso it be, Amen,
Blessed it is, believing, not to see,
Now God knows all that is; and we shall then,
Whatso it be.

God's Will is best for man whose will is free.
God's Will is better to us, yea, than ten
Desires whereof he holds and weighs the key.

* * * * *

He knows all wants, allots each where and when,
Whatso it be."—CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

"You have passed a bad night, signore," remarked Lionbruno, glancing up from his work at the prisoner.

Carlo, who to the last retained his sense of fun, saw the double meaning which the remark might bear, and smiled.

"I have not slept," he replied. "And you?"

"I," said Lionbruno, shrugging his shoulders, "have had to wake also, that I might keep guard."

"Do you think, then, that escape would be possible in such irons as these?"

"No, it would be impossible, even if the approach to the upper air were not well guarded. But it is one of Brancalone's laws that a prisoner should be watched night and day. It would have been irksome enough had I not turned you to account as a model."

The crucifix was now quite finished, and the carver, struck by the face he had had to watch through those long hours, had reproduced it in the wood with marvellous accuracy, catching precisely the expression

of pain, with steadfast hope underlying it, which the prisoner's face had borne through the night.

The features, too, had been reproduced so accurately that Carlo could not but recognise himself. He looked shocked, then pained, finally a faint smile dawned in his eyes, and he fell into deep thought.

Lionbruno left him for a few minutes, returning presently with a long loaf of bread tucked under his arm, a flask of *chianti* swinging from his wrist, and a huge basin of macaroni in his hands.

"Come," he said, with rough good-nature, "let us eat. I am hungry if you are not."

In silence they shared the food. The cell was now only lighted by one torch, which cast an orange glow over the carved crosses and crucifixes, and shone upon the faces of the two strangely-contrasted men. Carlo, worn-out with all he had gone through, looked pale and exhausted, but Lionbruno was in no wise fatigued by his want of sleep, and ate with the voracious appetite of a schoolboy. Carlo watched him with a good deal of curiosity, wondering greatly what his history could be.

"Where did you learn to carve like that?" he said at length, glancing once more at the crucifix.

"It was the one useful thing taught me at school, the one thing I ever took the pains to learn," said Lionbruno, with a laugh. "And when I had mastered all they could teach me, why, I ran away."

"Was it at Naples?"

"No, at Rome," continued Lionbruno, throwing himself lazily on the heap of shavings, and yielding to the fascination of Carlo's manner, as most people did. "*Diavolo!* what did I not suffer in those years! Cooped

up in a great stone building, watched every moment, guarded as though I had been a girl, and nothing to hope for in the future but the wretched life of a priest."

"A priest!" echoed Carlo, in astonishment.

"Ay, a preposterous notion, was it not? A mere whim of my mother's,—peace to her soul." He crossed himself with indescribable rapidity. It was the last almost unconscious tribute he still paid to the faith which his mother had held, but in which he himself had ceased to believe. "My father, willing to please her on her death-bed, promised that they should make a priest of me, and he did his best; but what would you have? It is not possible to turn a wolf into a sheep-dog, or an eagle into a canary. I bore it till I was seventeen, then, one night,"—he rubbed his hands with glee at the mere recollection—"one delightful, moonless night, the happiest in all my life, I broke loose from the fold, got a disguise, was within an ace of being caught, and at last got home to Corsica, half-starved, but free, and as happy as a king."

"Then Corsica is your home?"

"*Insomma!* I have run on, forgetting that possibly you will be free again to-morrow, and may betray us."

He looked annoyed, and half inclined to be angry.

"Do not be uneasy," said Carlo. "This is my last day in the world, and even did I wish to do so I could not possibly betray your haunts."

"You seem to look death in the face calmly enough; but it is far more likely that you will be set free."

Carlo shook his head.

"If I were set free it would mean that my whole life had failed. Something tells me that it is not so.

Therefore, you see, I must face the thought of death. And, while we are speaking of it, just tell me how it will be. Am I to be shot?"

Lionbruno's great black eyes were full of wonder, they were very much like the eyes of some animal. He was completely puzzled by his companion, and somehow awed by him.

"No," he said; "that could not be, here."

"What then, stabbed?"

Lionbruno shook his head.

"Poisoned, or perhaps hung?"

Again the young brigand made a gesture of dissent; then, with unmistakable meaning, he drew out his knife, and passed it lightly across his own throat, glancing significantly at the prisoner.

Carlo had too vivid an imagination not to shrink a little from the picture which presented itself to his mind; he grew suddenly cold, and felt a strange stirring in his heart, and a tightening about the muscles of his throat. But he quickly recovered himself, and, with no perceptible effort, returned to the interrupted story.

"And so you escaped from your school-life, and from all *espionage*. At first it must have been delightful."

"*Dio!* I should think it was!" exclaimed the boy. "To be out in the woods night and day, to have done with the hateful old routine, and for work to have nothing but adventure and excitement—why, it was paradise!"

"I fancied all the banditti had been captured at the time of the great extermination," said Carlo.

Lionbruno's face grew dark.

"That time gave us a blow from which we shall never recover," he said. "But my father somehow baffled all detection, and he will always baffle it, for he is more than a match for the Italian police in a body. Nothing but treachery could possibly beat him, and among the whole band there is not one man who would betray him, though they offered him his weight in diamonds."

"I can imagine that he would always meet with obedience and loyalty," said Carlo, recalling the powerful face of the chief.

"Anywhere he would be king of men," said Lionbruno, proudly. "And since the world gave him the cold shoulder, he must be king of banditti. Did you hear but a month or two back of the highway robberies in Corsica? They were planned and carried out by Brancaleone. Do you remember how Count Feroni was carried off in Sicily, and kept up in the mountains till the ransom was paid? That again was due to Brancaleone. And the great jewel robbery in Naples, that, too, was the work of our band. We are like the lightning, here, there, and everywhere; our work is done in a flash, and then—*presto!* all is darkness once more, and no one can lay hold of us."

"I remember now hearing of the disappearance of Count Feroni," said Carlo; "though the details were never published, perhaps for the sake of our country's honour. Do you know what that work of yours did? It killed the Count's mother; she died of the shock before his return."

"*Ebbene!* we must all die sooner or later," said Lionbruno, coolly.

There was an indignant light in Carlo's eyes which made the young Corsican shift his position uneasily.

"And this work of yours yesterday," continued Carlo; "it will not only end in murder, it will break hearts, and blight lives. Will you be proud of doing such devil's work as that?"

"A man must live," said Lionbruno, gloomily. "I only do what I was brought up to do. As to cruelty, Brancalone would not have the hold which he has on the hearts of the people were he a cruel chief. No prisoner has ever been ill-used by him, and if a man must be put out of the way, why, it is done promptly and without barbarity. The day for such things is past; we too, are civilised, our plots are more refined, as well as more successful, now that we have the telegraph always at our command."

Carlo started.

"Do you mean, then, that the telegram I had yesterday was your doing? Was it a mere trick?"

Lionbruno laughed, and rubbed his hands together.

"Was it not clever? The first idea was a note of invitation from the English Captain; but then there would have been the danger of the handwriting not being right. The telegram was my notion, and the sending it in English made it doubly safe; it was only because I had thought of it that I was given the charge of the whole affair, for, after all, I am young for such work. *Dio!* what sport it was! The watching for the yacht, and dogging your steps everywhere, while all the time you were so happily ignorant; then the breathless

race to Pozzuoli to send the telegram, and the anxiety of the afternoon when we did not know whether, perhaps, you might not after all refuse to go. How happy I was when I saw you by the Grotto of Posilipo! And you, too, looked happy. Ah, I shall never again have a better bit of sport!"

Carlo shuddered, the unblushing avowal made him recoil as from some hellish thing. He did not say a word, but Lionbruno noted his expression, and never forgot it.

"Come!" he said, his tone suddenly changing, "I can't stay all day in this dull hole. We will see what the others are up to."

"Can I not stay here in quiet?" pleaded Carlo.

But Lionbruno was inexorable. A prisoner must be watched day and night, and Carlo had to endure as best he could the long hours of that weary day, while his young guard whiled away the time with cards, *mora*, and idle jesting with the elder men of the band.

At length night came, and once more prisoner and gaoler made their way through the winding catacomb to the inner cell. Lionbruno, who had slept at intervals through the day, took up his carving once more, and Carlo, wearied with the noise and confusion which for so many hours he had had to bear, and still suffering from the effects of the blow he had received, stretched himself again on the heap of shavings.

"My last night," he reflected, then, turning to the young Corsican, asked what time the messenger would arrive the next day.

"Possibly not till midnight," replied Lionbruno,

pausing in his work to look at the prisoner; "but you will be placed in readiness at eleven. After all, I would as soon not see you murdered, though I know you think me a sort of devil."

"I think you nothing of the kind," said Carlo, with a vigour of denial which startled his companion. "The pity of it is that you are a man, meant for something very different, and yet willing to do the devil's work."

"I am only taking by force the share of property that the world won't give me fairly," said Lionbruno, doggedly. "If all things were equally divided there would be no need of banditti. As for your devil, I don't believe in him, nor in your God either; and that, too," he pointed to the crucifix, "it is all a fable! If it were true, why, instead of paying a hundred *lire* for a carving like this, to put in a private oratory, men would be dying on crosses themselves!"

Lionbruno, with his school recollections, and his angry bias against everything connected with the Church, would certainly have had the best of it in an argument, but Carlo was too well accustomed to living with people who despised all that he most revered, to feel moved to speak; he had learnt long ago that, as a rule, words do but stir up strife, and that he at any rate must keep to deeds. He was quite silent now, and through the long, quiet hours the vehement words that had last sounded in the cell kept ringing in his ears. Partly from the strain of physical and mental suffering, partly from a growing sense of nearness to the unseen world, he had all along found it very hard to realise his surroundings; the old Roman building,

hidden away below the earth's surface, the winding catacomb, the gloomy little cell with the carvings leaning against the rocky wall, all seemed to him more like scenes that he had read about than actual places where he was now living. Brancalone, too, and his followers, seemed to him like people in a dream that is over, though he had listened all day to their foul talk, and wearied of their noisy quarrels. But something in the words which his companion had last spoken roused him to a greater feeling of reality; he made an effort to realise to himself the sort of life that this mere boy of eighteen was living, and the more he realised it the more he pitied him, and the more he felt drawn to him. Again and again his eyes turned to the dark, resolute, handsome face of the young Corsican; it had not yet acquired the cold wickedness of Brancalone's face, it was too young and boyish for that, too full of mere animal delight in existence; but another year or two of this wild life would make him merely a younger and more headstrong edition of his father.

"You do not sleep, signore," observed Lionbruno, looking up from his work as the prisoner moved restlessly and the dismal sound of clanking irons echoed through the quiet cell.

"They say a condemned prisoner always sleeps well on his last night," said Carlo; "but I never felt more wakeful in my life."

"Then tell me your story," said Lionbruno, "for it is dull enough with nothing to do but keep guard. I told you of my life yesterday, now tell me of yours."

Willing to please his companion, and with a feeling that on this his last night it would comfort him to go

once more over his memories of the past, Carlo told in his spontaneous, graphic fashion the story of his life, and Lionbruno listened with rapt attention, partly because the prisoner was a good *raconteur*, but chiefly because he was conscious of something which was a most novel contrast to anything he had yet come across in the world. It was nothing but a summary of facts which Carlo gave him, but Lionbruno was artist enough to have a quick eye for beauty, and a capability of reading between the lines, as it were, while the mingled openness and reserve of the story, the lack of self-consciousness, yet the innate modesty of the speaker, forced him to perceive a new idea.

His own words returned to him,—“If it were true, men would be dying on crosses themselves!” Then he looked from the carved crucifix to the face of the prisoner, and again back to the crucifix. After all, was it something more than a fable? Deep down in his heart there wakened a new, uncomfortable, unwelcome conviction, which he did his best to smother, because he saw that it would work havoc in his life, and Lionbruno in this respect was as lazy and conservative as most people; a revolution in society was what he longed for, but a revolution in his own heart and life could not be tolerated, the bare idea made him feel as uncomfortable and perturbed as a wealthy landowner who thinks with dread of a possible reform of the land laws.

All the next day he was markedly civil to his prisoner. He even sacrificed himself so far as to remain in the dreary little cell, instead of insisting, as before, on spending the time with the rest of the gang.

Carlo spoke little, for grief and suspense and the long-continued sleeplessness had brought him almost to the last stage of exhaustion, but what few words he did say were courteous and pleasant, and in tone not otherwise than cheerful. Lionbruno began to think more and more distastefully of the scene that would be enacted that evening, and, as the time drew near, he could bear it no longer, but summoning one of the elder men to keep guard in his place, sought out the chief and begged to speak alone with him.

Brancaleone led the way from the gloomy underground retreat to the open air. Already it was dark, but here and there, between the thick foliage, were little spaces through which stars gleamed down coldly. Lionbruno gave a gasp of relief as he found himself once more above ground, for the atmosphere down below was not a little trying to one accustomed to an outdoor life.

"*Padre mio*," he said boldly, "should the red flag be sent to-night, why should you not keep the prisoner longer and make money out of him? He has rich friends, he is a popular singer, thousands would be interested in his fate, we could extort an enormous ransom."

"Is that all you have to say?" said Brancaleone, with scorn. "Did you ever know me go back from my word? If Comerio is true to his bargain, do you think I shall play him false?"

"At least I have some right to speak for the prisoner since I was the one who took him," said Lionbruno, with deep resentment in his voice.

"No right whatever," said the chief, coldly; "you

are merely one of my band; your duty is to obey orders, not to think."

"I tell you," said Lionbruno, with an angry gesture, "if you kill him you will regret it some day. A man like that can't be murdered lightly."

"What do you know about him?" said the chief, tauntingly.

"I know that he is the only true man I have ever seen, while we are brutes—worse than brutes!" said Lionbruno, with passionate vehemence.

Brancaleone suddenly turned upon him and grasped him by the shoulder. "Say another word, and you yourself shall be the one to cut his throat!" he said in a voice that was none the less furious because low and restrained.

With a heavy heart Lionbruno followed the chief back into the secret retreat, returning an impatient oath to the teasing inquiries of the other men, while he lighted his torch at the fire before making his way through the catacomb.

"Bring the prisoner in at once," said the chief, eyeing his son distrustfully.

Releasing Nicolo from his post in the cell, Lionbruno, still bearing the torch, came close to the pile of shavings and bent down over the prisoner.

"I have tried to save you," he murmured, "but it was all in vain. When I took you prisoner I did not know what I know now. Give me your pardon, signore. I would gladly undo the past, were that possible."

Carlo grasped his hand.

"Undo it by breaking with it and starting afresh," he said. "And, look, will you do one thing for me?"

Lionbruno made a gesture of assent.

"See, to-day, while you slept, I wrote this letter; if necessary you can read it, there is not a line in it that can betray you. Promise me when I am dead to send it. I have no stamp, but there is the address."

Lionbruno glanced at the note, saw that it was directed to "Miss Britton," and without further comment thrust it into his pocket.

"Brancaleone orders you to be brought in," he said, huskily. "Are you prepared, signore?"

"Quite," replied Carlo, standing up, and speaking as calmly as though no terrible ordeal awaited him.

And yet it was not that he shrank from it less than other men would have done; he looked regretfully round the little gloomy cell, and slowly followed his guide through the winding catacomb and out into the larger building, perceiving even then the picturesqueness of the scene with its deep shadows and glowing torchlight. Brancaleone sat smoking as composedly as though no murder were contemplated that night; close by, Nicolo stirred the contents of a caldron which hung over a charcoal brazier, while the rest of the men were playing cards and quarrelling among themselves. The chief turned his cold eyes on the prisoner.

"My messenger may arrive any time within the next hour," he said. "You will therefore be ready for your fate, whatever it may be. Should we have been betrayed, and should a rescuing-party be sent with him, you will instantly be shot. Should you see him wave a white handkerchief, it will mean that you are free; should he wave a red one, you will feel the sharpness of this knife."

Carlo replied only by a slight gesture. His dignity appealed to Brancalone, who eyed him curiously, knowing that never before had he met with such a prisoner.

"Rocco! Maso! take your places!" he called peremptorily.

Two of the men instantly threw down their cards; and Carlo found himself taken to that end of the building which was farthest from a dark archway, presumably leading to another catacomb, and from thence to the upper air. On either side of him stood a ruffianly-looking Neapolitan, with a loaded pistol held within a few inches of his temples; and to the right hand, and a little in advance of the others, sat the chief ostentatiously sharpening his knife. It was an ordeal that would have tried the strongest nerves; the horrible, grim suspense of it was a torture such as Carlo had never conceived; and nothing but long practice in self-control could have enabled him to keep under the sickening anticipations of the butchery that was soon to take place. With a strong effort he turned from such thoughts, not even allowing himself to watch the dark archway opposite, where his imagination kept picturing a confusion of red tokens and white tokens, until he was as much dazzled as Gigi used to be over the Pears' soap puzzle in England. With a pang he remembered that he had never said good-bye to the little fellow; and a hundred trifling recollections of unfinished work rushed through his brain, till a flash of Brancalone's knife in the torchlight recalled him to the terrible present. Then he fixed his eyes steadily on the cross which Lionbruno was carving, and again the thought of his visible surroundings faded.

By-and-by came visions of what lay beyond this hour of torture. He thought of the evil defeated, of Anita saved for ever from Comerio's influence. He pictured to himself how she would pass unscathed through her hard life, with Gigi to shield her, with Francesca to comfort her and cling to her for his sake, with a love for him which should be an actual safeguard, not a vague regret. But with the thought of Francesca, there came once more the wild clinging to life. She would be his, indeed, in another world; but he craved for her now, he shrank back from the parting—the unknown change.

For, reason about it as we may, all endings are hard. We ended our schooldays regretfully, and shrank a little from stepping out alone into the fuller and freer life, for which all along we had been preparing. It was not that home was less dear; it was not that we were less eager to begin life; it was only that human nature cannot say the irrevocable "never again" without a pang.

And, after all, the past had been happy, spite of all the troubles. Standing there, face to face with death, he seemed to live it all through once more. He thought of his quiet childhood, of his mother's devotion, of his happy betrothal. Once more he lived through the story of his love for Francesca, with its brief gleams of rapture and its long years of wearing separation; once more he lived his art-life—triumphed in this character, failed in that, faced abuse on and off the stage, felt the glow of genuine success. And again he lived through the pain and bliss of that night at Genoa, with its violent reaction, its rapture of faithful love;

again he felt Francesca clinging to him, heard her words of perfect trust, knew that the anguish of the past had been a mere device of Satan.

But Brancalone moved, and the torchlight fell again on the cold steel blade. In a few minutes there must come that awful helplessness, that violence, and anguish, and slaughter. His heart throbbed wildly; and once more, to calm himself, he turned his eyes to Lionbruno's cross. The boy's words returned to him, "As to that, it's a mere fable! If it were true, men would be dying on crosses themselves!"

"How little I have done to prove that it is truest truth, and no fable," he thought, sadly.

"Yet for these last three years you have honestly tried to follow me," said a Voice in his heart. And the words of comfort brought him a great gladness, for he knew that, slowly and stumblingly, and with an amount of effort that proved his own weakness and the strength of the Divine help that had been his, he really had tried to live the life of the Crucified, with its whole-hearted seeking of the Divine will. After all, was any happiness to be compared to the happiness that came to him even in this last extremity? Was there not a deep truth in the poet's idea that the Divine will is sweetest to us "when it triumphs at our cost."

"If ever a man were ready to die it is that man," reflected Lionbruno. "But, *Corpo di Bacco!* how shall I sit patiently by and see him murdered!"

He shuddered, and yet something in the beautiful, manly face raised him above the thought of the scene of bloodshed. How was it that this man, in the first

flush of youth and strength, could willingly give up everything—even life itself—to save another from sin? How was it that he could stand for an hour face to face with a most horrible death, yet show neither fear, nor resentment, nor bravado—only a noble, intrepid calm?

Into the brigand's semi-cultivated mind the sight flashed something more than the unwelcome conviction of the previous night. All his shallow unbelief died in the light of that revelation. It was not that he now believed there was a God, he *knew* it; he knew that the Son of God must indeed have taught men how to live and die; he saw that he had before him, on the one hand a proof of the heights to which men could rise who followed at all costs the guidance of the Holy Spirit; on the other of the depths to which men could sink who sought at all costs their own pleasures.

The place had been strangely still for some minutes. Nicolo had left his caldron, and now lay on the floor smoking; the card-players had finished their game, and seemed to think it was not worth while to begin another before the event of the evening came off; one swarthy, black-bearded fellow shuffled the cards, the others lounged at ease, watching the prisoner indifferently.

When at length a voice in the distance spoke the password, every one present started slightly. Carlo drew himself up to his full height and looked steadily towards the dark archway; Brancalone rose, and, with one hand on his victim and the knife in the other, glanced over his shoulder, ready either to strike or to forbear; Lionbruno dropped his cross, and glanced in great agitation from the archway to the prisoner, and

back again to the archway. The footsteps drew nearer; the messenger suddenly turned the corner, and emerged into sight; the torchlight fell on the token in his hand—was it white or red? With a gasp of relief, Lionbruno sprang forward and seized the handkerchief, waving it joyfully in the air; while the messenger advanced and handed a sealed packet to the chief, who at once sheathed his knife and turned to the prisoner.

"You are free, signore," he said gravely.

"Nita is ruined! I have failed!" thought Carlo.

The sharpest pang he had ever had to bear shot through him; and, without a word, he fell to the ground.

"*Diavolo!*" exclaimed the chief. "I have often seen a prisoner overcome on hearing his death-sentence, but never yet on getting a reprieve!"

Lionbruno looked with many conflicting feelings at the face which had grown so familiar to him. "*Per quanto è vero Dio!*" he remarked, with an expressive gesture, "he really did then care more for his sister's honour than for his own life!"

CHAPTER XVI.
AT PALAZZO FORTI.

"Love is enough: ho, ye who seek saving
Go no further; come hither; there have been who have found it,
And these know the House of Fulfilment of Craving;
These know the cup with the roses around it;
These know the World's Wound and the balm that hath bound it;
Cry out, the World heedeth not, 'Love, lead us home!'

"He leadeth, he hearkeneth, he cometh to youward;
Set your faces as steel to the fears that assemble
Round his goad for the faint, and his scourge for the froward;
Lo his lips, how with tales of last kisses they tremble!
Lo his eyes of all sorrow that may not dissemble!
Cry out, for he heedeth, 'O Love, lead us home!'"

WILLIAM MORRIS.

ON that Monday evening, after Carlo had started for Casa Bella, Nita dined alone, Gigi hovering round, and always ready to accept promiscuous mouthfuls off her plate like a pet dog. When the child had gone to bed, she sat down to the piano, her fingers roaming over the keys and playing a sort of subdued accompaniment to her reverie.

"I am going to turn over a new leaf," she thought to herself; "it is after all rather pleasant to be good, and not so hard as I thought. I have enjoyed these days on the yacht with the Brittons; it was not half so dull as I expected. There was something so peaceful and quiet about it. I think I'm tired of being naughty. Now I'll be like Carlo; that will be a novelty."

She was interrupted by the entrance of the servant with a visitor's card. Holding out her hand for it

carelessly, she glanced down at the name and saw that it was Comerio's. A terrible fear seized on her.

"Say I do not receive to-night. I am engaged—not well!" she exclaimed breathlessly.

The servant retired, but in another minute came back still bearing the card, on which Comerio had pencilled a few words.

"You must see me on a matter of life and death!"

Nita's colour came and went, but to refuse now seemed to her impossible, and the next minute she was alone with her lover. Yet, after all, did she love him or hate him? Of one thing only she was conscious—that with all her heart she feared him, and that over her he had some strange, deadly influence.

"How can you dare to come here!" she cried, passionately. "Did I not tell you I would never speak to you again?"

Comerio smiled.

"I come because I love you," he replied; "because I knew you would not keep to your threat; because, happen what may, I will never give you up. I have waited for you all these years, Nita, but now you will be mine."

"Never!" she cried, vehemently; and, with a growing sense of terror, she tried to pass him and reach the door.

"Do not speak too hastily," he said, intercepting her; "you are altogether in my power. Your brother has thwarted me for long; now it is my turn. If you wish him to die, to be murdered for your sake, you will refuse to come with me. If you wish to save him you will leave Naples with me to-night; we will fly to Australia and begin our new life there!"

"Oh! it isn't true," sobbed Nita; "it can't be true! Carlo could never be in your power!"

"Not true?" said Comerio, with a mocking laugh. "It is as true as the Gospel. Do you think the Pozzuoli road is so much frequented that I couldn't have him waylaid? I tell you his fate rests in your hands. Now choose!"

"You must be a fiend!" sobbed Nita. "Only a fiend could make such a plan!"

"A fiend or a lover," said Comerio. "All is fair in love and war, Nita, and I love you—I love you,—and I will have you. You shall not deny me!"

Again the old subtle influence crept over poor Nita's tempest-tossed heart; it needed only half an hour of Comerio's impassioned pleading to break down all her resolutions. After all, her life was hard and weary, and her husband rough and overbearing, and goodness was dull, and this scheme was exciting; besides, it would save Carlo—Carlo, whom she really loved. Yes, she would save him at all costs; she, too, would be self-sacrificing—she would give up everything to save him from death.

It was all over very quickly—the dispute, the struggle, the promise,—then once more she was alone with but a few hours in which to make all arrangements for her flight, for Comerio had promised that a carriage should be in waiting for her at twelve o'clock, and had hastened off to see that all his plans were in working order. He had absolute confidence in his own power over her, which was indeed great; but there was another Power which he had forgotten to take into account—a Power which could no more be laid hold

of, and shut up with Carlo in the brigands' retreat, than the wind.

"He shall not die for my sake!" sobbed Nita to herself; "I will save him by yielding. And yet—yet it is what he would say was wrong; he would call it doing evil that good might come. Oh! what am I to do? Why did I ever see Comerio?"

She was like a poor terrified bird in a cage, flying now to this side, now to that, but meeting always with hard, impassable bars. The temptation to escape from her distasteful life, into a life that was new and untried, was terrible. And yet, as in sick recoil she looked at her past, there shone out in it always one bright light. A hundred little details of Carlo's care for her flashed back into her mind; scenes rose up before her in the green-room, at rehearsals, in desolate lodgings, on tedious journeys; and always he was there as her helper, the one perfectly trustworthy man in her world. He had given up all to save her from sin. Should she now yield to the temptation? Dared she delude herself into thinking that she sinned to save him from death? Had not his whole life proved to her that he would rather die than that she should so fall? Sobbing and trembling she threw herself on her knees, crushed beneath that awful realisation of a decisive choice which must be made, maddened by the consciousness that time was passing, tossed to and fro in the storm of deadly temptation. It was not the breaking of a conventional law which she was contemplating; it was not a mere offence against society with which she had been dallying all these years; it was a sin. And the full meaning of that word broke on her as she knelt there.

Sin was not a vague "something" to be comfortably confessed and disposed of; it was a contradiction of good, which must work its deadly course, inevitably bringing grief, and pain, and hardship on the innocent and loving. To save her from this sin Carlo had sacrificed his whole life; could she let that sacrifice be in vain?

And, after all, was it love which Comerio offered her? Could she name it in the same breath with the love which had shielded and guarded her through those three years? No; it was a hateful, vile counterfeit of love, a ghastly parody of the truth, a veiled selfishness, which could only drag her down to hell on earth. Carlo would die a thousand deaths rather than let her sink to this! And was it even now too late to save him?

In wild excitement she sprang to her feet, Comerio, in the heat of the moment, had let something fall about the Pozzuoli road! Why should she not rush to Casa Bella and prevent her brother's return, and save him from the attack that had been planned? What gave her strength for this desperate resolution she hardly knew, but the thought itself seemed to lend her wings. She rushed to her bedroom, snatched up a cloak and bonnet, drew a veil over her face, and, without even pausing to close the door of the house behind her, crept down the long stone staircase. The *concierge* was reading *La Campana* as she glided past his little office; he was so much absorbed that he never even saw her.

And now she was actually in the street, and, for the first time since her resolution had been made, a feeling of fear and perplexity overwhelmed her, her brain seemed to reel. "Holy Virgin, protect me!" she

sobbed, and walked on blindly, too much terrified to form any clear plan of action. All at once she caught sight of a disengaged carriage, and signed to the driver to stop. He looked at her suspiciously, but she was far too miserable to resent that.

"Drive to Pozzuoli," she said; "to Casa Bella."

The man, however, grumbled. It was late, a long drive, his horse was tired. Nita thrust two gold coins into his hand.

"Go! go!" she cried. "Another if you will drive fast!"

Then she leant back in the carriage and covered her face with her hands, trembling in every limb, expecting each minute that Comerio would find out all and pursue her. The drive seemed endless, but at last Casa Bella was reached; she sprang out and asked eagerly for Signor Donati.

"He is not here, signora," said old Dino, looking at her curiously. "He has not been here at all."

Nita gave a cry that brought all the household flocking into the hall. They took her into the Rose-room, and there gradually drew from her the whole piteous story. Francesca, as she listened, turned pale as death, but to endure a moment's discussion or delay was to her impossible. Before the Captain or Mr. Britton could even recover enough from the shock to frame a clear idea, she had left the room, had run bareheaded out into the summer night, and was flying to the telegraph-office. Panting, breathless, with a weight of torturing fear at her heart, she yet ran like the wind. Carlo was in terrible danger, but she might yet save him. The office was still open; she wrote without a

moment's delay the following words to the Chief of the Police: "Signor Carlo Donati was waylaid on the road to Pozzuoli this afternoon and has not been heard of since. The plot was arranged by the singer Giovanni Comerio. Arrest him immediately."

In the meantime, Comerio, little thinking of the turn affairs had taken, was making his arrangements with the utmost calmness and deliberation. First of all he went to Brancaleone's agent, who lived in one of the worst quarters of Naples. Here he deposited the white handkerchief, which had been the token decided on, and the little packet of notes for the payment of the brigand chief. Then he gave his final orders about the carriage which was to take them out of Naples; and afterwards, finding that he had yet time to spare on his hands, he went into a *caffè*, where, to fortify himself for the excitement of the evening, he called for a bottle of champagne. As he sat there at his little marble table, he thought, with a smile, of the great success of his plans, and a funny recollection came back to him of the old days when he had lived at his father's country farm. He remembered how he had once looked out on a moonlight night, and had become so absorbed in watching the tactics of a fox that he had not given the alarm to the household. The animal had set his heart on a fine hen which had gone to roost in an olive-tree, and which, roused from her slumbers, was watching the fox in deadly terror. He could not reach her, but with deep cunning walked slowly round and round the tree, the hen following him with her eyes in a sort of deadly fascination, till at last, from sheer giddiness, she dropped, and was carried off

in triumph. The idea of punishing Donati and altogether outwitting him was delightful, even more delightful than the idea of winning Anita. But, after all, he reflected, it was always so in this world. Right could make a sort of feeble resistance, but in the end Might always triumphed. And really luck had been with him of late. His London engagement had been extremely successful, while, to crown all, he had won enormously at Monaco, and could well afford to gratify both his love and his hate.

Sauntering out of the *caffè*, and still musing over his good fortune, he was a little startled when a passer-by thrust a note into his hand, and walked rapidly on. He paused to read it under a street lamp. It ran as follows:—

“Signor Comerio, be warned by a friend, and fly from Naples at once. You are in danger of being arrested.”

Though capable, in order to gratify himself, of a certain amount of rash daring, Comerio was at heart a coward. He had a friend connected with the police force, and did not doubt for a moment that the warning came from him. He knew that he had not a moment to lose. Still the mere hatred of being baffled in his plans induced him to risk a call at Palazzo Forti. There was yet a chance that they might be able to fly together, and now that all was known he risked little more by making this final attempt. Breathlessly he made his way through the dusky courtyard and up the long stone staircase. To his surprise, the door at the top was open. He stole in and opened the door of the ante-room, calling Anita in a low voice. He went

into the *sala*, but that, too, was empty and deserted. He knocked at the door of the bedroom; that, also, was tenantless. Then, with a faint suspicion dawning in his mind that Nita had played him false, he ground his teeth together, and flung open the two remaining doors in the suite. Possibly she was with the child. Snatching up a lamp from a table in the passage, he went into the room to make quite sure that she was not there,—looked with a sort of dumb rage at Donati's various possessions which were strewn about,—then walked up to the bed where Gigi lay sleeping with both arms flung up on the pillow above his head, and his ruddy-brown little face the picture of sturdy peacefulness. Comerio shook him by the shoulder.

"Where is your mother, child?" he said, in a voice that terrified Gigi. "Can't you speak?" he reiterated. "Where is your mother?"

"I don't know!" sobbed the child.

"*Accidente!* she has played me false!" cried Comerio.

Then, suddenly holding his breath, he paused to listen. Undoubtedly men's voices and footsteps were approaching. Darting to the door, he drew the bolt, then rushed across to the window, flung it open, leapt out on to the balcony, and disappeared in the darkness.

Gigi's first impulse was to draw the bedclothes over his head and sob for very terror, but some recollection of Carlo checked him, and summoning up all his courage, he scrambled out of bed, unbolted the door, and ran out into the passage, calling now for Carlo, now for his mother.

Strange men whom he had never seen before were

marching in and out of the rooms; whether to run to them or from them he hardly knew.

"Here is a child!" exclaimed one of the detectives, picking him up in his arms. "Tell us, little one, who is in the house?"

"Signor Comerio," sobbed Gigi.

"*Santo diavolo!* where?" exclaimed the man.

Gigi pointed in the direction of his room.

"Through the window," he said, with a rush of tears.

For all answer, the man tossed him on to the bed as though he had been an india-rubber ball, and leapt on to the balcony, while the rest rushed downstairs to cut off the retreat below.

But their efforts were useless; Comerio had got the start of them, and, with darkness to favour him, found little difficulty in making his escape from Naples.

While the Neapolitan police were still searching high and low for him, he was steaming down the Mediterranean, knowing that never again could he dare to set foot in Italy, and baffled both in his love and in his revenge.

"If only I had had time to go again to Brancaleone's agent, and change the white token for the red, I could bear all else!" he reflected.

But the white handkerchief remained just as he had left it with the sealed packet of notes, and the true love had triumphed over the false.

At Casa Bella all was confusion, and, afterwards, those fearful hours seemed to Francesca like a long, hideous nightmare. She had vague recollections of returning from the telegraph-office, and seeing Clare and Kate bending over Nita's prostrate figure; of a

discussion with her father and Uncle George as to whether she should drive in to Naples with them or not; of reaching Palazzo Forti in the dead of night, and finding poor little Gigi sobbing and shivering; of driving home with him on her knee, and feeling a sort of comfort in folding her arms round him, and letting him talk on in his happy ignorance;—then, of two fearful nights and days, while all Naples was searched, and not the slightest clue as to Carlo's whereabouts could be discovered. In the meantime, Nita lay in the guest-chamber, and many times each day both priest and doctor passed in and out.

"Why do those men come so dreffly often?" asked Gigi, one day, turning to his friend and playfellow, Sibyl, and forgetting for a minute the sham-fight which was going on between his two boxes of tin soldiers.

"Why, Dino says your mother is dying," said Sibyl, her eyes dilating. "But, oh! Gigi, perhaps I oughtn't to have said anything! Don't tell the others I told you!"

"But she *can't*," said Gigi, emphatically,—"*not* until Uncle Carlo comes back!"

And so, while the elders of the household lived through their terrible agony of suspense, the two children, who were much thrown together and left to their own devices in those days, kept their own counsel as children do, and waited gravely for Carlo's return.

CHAPTER XVII.

AT CASA BELLA.

"Too divine to be mistook."—MILTON.

EARLY on the Thursday morning Captain Britton was roused from a short and uneasy sleep on the sofa in his study by the sound of voices on the staircase. He rose quickly, remembering that Francesca had taken Miss Claremont's place in the sick-room, and that he had promised to be at hand in case anything was needed.

"How is Madame Merlino?" he asked, going out into the hall, where Franzoni the doctor was just taking up his hat and cloak.

"Better for the time," replied the doctor, "but I doubt if she will last much longer; the shock has been too much for her, and this suspense is the very worst thing. She has inherited her mother's constitution, you see, and when the heart is in question such a strain is killing work."

Francesca moved away from the speakers that she might hide her tears. A lamp which had burnt for many hours stood on the table, gleaming faintly in the early morning light. She turned it out, glad to have some little trivial household matter to attend to, and finding it, as most women do, a relief in trouble.

Captain Britton went out with the doctor, not sorry to escape for a few minutes from the burdened atmosphere of his own house, and Francesca, knowing that Father Cristoforo was with Nita, lingered beside

the open door, glad for a few minutes to be alone with her grief. The sun had not yet risen, but rosy clouds floated in the soft, sheeny sky, and a delicious fragrance came from the garden, which was all wet with dew. Everything was still and peaceful, with the restful calmness of dawn; perhaps it unconsciously influenced Francesca, or perhaps it was mere exhaustion which quieted her throbbing pulses. Certainly the sound of footsteps on the road from Naples, which yesterday would have made her heart leap into her mouth, scarcely roused her now. She just looked up wearily, too heavy-hearted to hope any longer. But suddenly the blood surged through her veins, and with a low cry she rushed forward.

"Carlo! Carlo!" she sobbed, "you have come at last!"

Clinging to him in that first minute of rapture she forgot all else, but a second glance at his face reminded her of Nita, for he bore the look of a man who has passed through terrible suffering, and how much he knew of Comerio's plot she could not tell.

"Carlino," she said, tenderly, "try and prepare yourself for what I have to tell you."

"I am prepared," he said, in the voice of one whose work is over—one who knows that he has failed.

"Who can have met you so early? Oh, Carlo, we have tried to take care of her, but she is dying. She has been ill ever since that Monday night."

"Do you mean that Nita is here, with you? that she is safe?" he cried, eager hope dawning in his eyes. Then, as she told him all, a light, such as she had never before seen, shone in his face.

"God has been very good to us," he said, simply.

In a very few words he told her what had happened to him, and then, while she went to prepare Nita for his coming, he stayed below, receiving the warm-hearted greetings of the Captain, giving him a brief account of his imprisonment and release, and thanking him with tears in his eyes for having sheltered his sister. Somehow the old patronising tone disappeared altogether from the Captain's voice as he struggled to reply.

"Do you thank us for what *we* have done?" he exclaimed, with a choking sensation in his throat, and forgetting altogether to fear what people would say, forgetting even to regret the connexion with the stage. "I wish it could have been more. I wish I had stood by you in the past, Carlo."

As he thought of the insults he had heaped on the Italian years ago the colour mounted to his temples, and he would have given all in his power to have had over again the opportunity which he had wasted.

But before anything more had passed between them, Francesca came to summon Carlo to the sick room, and not sorry to be free from the Captain's questions and congratulations, he followed her upstairs into a bedroom which he knew must be her own. It touched him to think that Nita should be in this place of all others, with its indescribable air of purity, and peace, and safety, with its English comforts, with its girlish ornaments and pictures. The bed stood facing the window, with its white, mosquito-curtains drawn back, but he could not see Anita, for Father Cristoforo was bending over her.

"My daughter," the old man was saying, in his

gentle, soothing voice, "be comforted. Our prayers are heard. Try to take this joy calmly, and as a pledge of your forgiveness."

Then he quietly drew back and, looking with loving reverence at his old pupil, signed to him to take his place.

One glance at Anita's worn, weary face showed Carlo that she was dying. He took both her outstretched hands in his, and bending down kissed her again and again. She was dying, but yet it was the sense that she was safe which outweighed all else.

For a long time perfect silence reigned in the room, then Nita spoke faintly.

"Why I liked the yacht," she said, half dreamily, "was because you were all so good—there was no temptation. I wanted to be good—only it was always too hard."

Worn out, exhausted, and fearful, she had none of that natural clinging to life which Carlo had so lately felt.

"I never understood that till now," she said, glancing at the crucifix which Father Cristoforo held on the other side of the bed. "But now I see it all,—it is you that have made me see, Carlino."

His eyes filled with glad tear, and again he kissed her reverently.

"You will keep to the stage still," she said, after a time. "Let me at least feel that I have done that much for the profession. I've been no credit to it myself, but you, Carlino—you went into it for my sake, and they will respect you. You will not leave the stage?"

"No," he said, turning his thoughts to the future with an effort; "I shall not leave it."

"I should have liked to sing with you once more," she murmured dreamily. "When you hold me like that it makes me feel like Gilda. I tried to put you out the last time we sang that scene,—it was at New York, don't you remember, the night of Sardoni's benefit, and I was cross because my white satin had got some paint on it."

"My daughter," said Father Cristoforo gently, "you will wear yourself out with talking."

"No matter!" she said, with a little impatient motion of the hand. "I am dying—I shall die as I please. Where is Gigi? Let me say good-bye to Gigi."

Francesca slipped out of the room and went to find the child, bringing him in just as he was, in his little nightshirt, and with his hair all rough and disordered. She had told him that his mother was very ill, and that he must be quiet, but in the glad surprise of seeing Carlo he forgot all else, and with a rapturous shout of "*zio caro!*" sprang towards the bed. Carlo took him in his arms, trying to quiet him with kisses, and Nita watched them sadly.

"Well, it is natural enough he should care for you and not for me," she said wistfully. "I never liked to be troubled with him."

"No, no," said Carlo quickly; "he loves you, it is only that he does not understand illness."

And putting the child on the bed, he laid the little fat brown hands in between the cold white ones. Gigi looked at his mother with wondering eyes.

"Do you think he will have a voice?" she asked.

"He surely will sing—I hope he will. But don't let Merlino be unkind to him, promise to care for him always."

"Always," said Carlo. "For your sake."

And Francesca bent down and kissed her, while the child, aware now that something was wrong, listened wistfully.

"I have been a bad wife," moaned Nita, "and a bad sister, and a bad mother. Oh, Gigi—my Gigi—you must not grow like me! Be good, *carino*,—be good!"

"Yes, mamma," said Gigi, simply.

With a sob she raised herself and caught him in her arms, but once more deadly faintness crept over her, and she fell back unconscious.

Francesca took Gigi away to Sibyl, and by the time she was able to return Anita had revived. Father Cristoforo had thrown the window wide open; Francesca stole quietly across the room and stood beside it, listening now to the old priest's hushed voice, now to the birds in the garden below; the sun had risen, and sea, and trees, and houses glowed in the roseate light, contrasting strangely with the scene within. When the last offices were ended there was a long pause, broken at length by Anita's faint voice.

"Why are the footlights out?" she asked, impatiently.

"Because the sun has risen," replied Carlo, smoothing back the fringe of dark hair from her cold forehead.

"I can't see," she said, with a little shudder.

Then after a minute, losing consciousness of the present, she sang just above her breath a little snatch from *Faust*:—

*"Oh del ciel angeli immortal!
Deh mi guidate con voi lassù."*

There was something inexpressibly touching in the faint yet still beautiful voice; Carlo's breast heaved and his eyes grew dim. Evidently she was wandering—fancying herself back once more in the old life.

"Well! it is over, she murmured, "and I'm tired—it's a long opera! How cold it is lying on this draughty stage! But Carlo will be waiting with my cloak, he always thinks of me, though I am so cross to him." Then, her voice rising to a cry, "Carlino! Carlino! Come back! Oh, God! I have killed him—my sin has killed him!"

"I am here, Nita, close to you," he replied, bending over her, while Father Cristoforo held the crucifix to her lips.

She came back to the present, and grew calmer.

"You see I never understood till you showed me," she whispered. "Oh, Carlo! how much you have borne for me!"

He held her more closely. "Don't you understand that I love you?" he said.

"Yet I wish that—I too—had loved!" she gasped, in a voice so sad that Francesca's heart ached for her.

After that she never spoke clearly again, only, as Carlo listened intently to the last long-drawn sighs, he caught one more faint whisper—"Gesù!"

Then he laid her down tenderly on the pillow, and closed her eyes, and folded her hands over the crucifix on her breast. The sun had fully risen, and golden rays played about him as he moved. Francesca noticed it, and would not draw down the blind.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AFTERWARDS.

"Man seeks pleasure and self—great unforeseen results follow.
Man seeks God and others—and there follows pleasure."

ARNOLD TOYNBEE.

FOR the next two or three weeks the story of Carlo and Anita was in everyone's mouth; the account of Comerio's vengeance, and the alarming news of brigandage in the very environs of Naples, created something like a panic, while, as to Donati's share in the matter, opinions were divided. Some called him a hero, some a fool, others remarked cynically that in any case the affair would be a good advertisement for him, and that now, at any rate, he might be expected to draw large houses.

Merlino, when he learnt all, made scarcely any comment on what had happened. He merely wound up the affairs of his Company, and announced his retirement from the position of Impresario. Only in regard to Gigi did he show any sign of feeling.

"You'll be kind to the child, Val?" he said, as he bade his brother-in-law good-bye. "I shall stay in America for a few years till this scandal has had time to fade in people's minds. But you'll go to the school and see that Gigi is all right, now and then; won't you?"

"He shall be like my own child!" said Carlo, warmly. "His holidays shall always be spent with us."

People were surprised that the new baritone fulfilled his engagement at the San Carlo that summer. Some called him cold-blooded, others called him brave and

honourable, and both those who praised and those who blamed flocked to hear him. He went his way, as ever, with straightforward simplicity, thinking of the past with thankfulness and of the future with eager hope.

"*Carina*," he said, one afternoon, as he sat beside Francesca in the familiar old belvedere which had sweet memories for them both,—"*Carina*, here is work enough for me for months to come,—offers of engagements all over Europe. Piale wishes to know which of them we are pleased to accept."

"We?" she said, smiling and blushing.

"You do not think I could go without you?" he exclaimed. "You will not send me away alone?"

"No," she said, with deepening colour; "I don't think you would take enough care of yourself."

"Darling!" he said, drawing her towards him, "why should we wait any longer? Let us be married quietly while Mr. Britton and Clare are still here."

"But they are only here for another week," said Francesca.

"*Ebbene?*" said Carlo, with a world of expression in his tone.

"How could I be ready?" she faltered. "A wedding takes a great deal of preparation—certainly Flora's did. I must at least have a dress that is fit for your eyes to look on."

"If you want to dress to please me, I will tell you what to wear," he said, smiling. "Wear that white dress like a baby's—the one you wore on the night of our betrothal."

"That old nainsook!" she cried. "Why, Carlo, it is more fit for the rag-bag than for a wedding!"

He made one of his expressive Neapolitan gestures.

"I should like nothing else so well, and you will see it will wash and get up in two days' time, and look as good as new. "Oh, I am very learned in such matters now, I assure you."

She smiled, and nestled close to him.

"I will wear anything to please you, *mio caro!* And, after all, we don't want to be thinking of new dresses just now. All I want is to go away from everything else for a little while—away with you. Let us go somewhere among the mountains where there are no people and no newspapers—nothing but just we two by ourselves!"

He kissed her white forehead.

"*Carina,*" he said, thoughtfully, "if one did not believe success to be a sort of sacrament, it would frighten one."

She mused over the old definition in the Prayer-book, and caught his meaning.

"They said at Merlebank it was useless knight-errantry," she replied; "but I think they changed their minds when they saw the smile on Nita's face after all was over. Do you remember what she said about those days on the yacht? It made me cry, for I never saw till then how fearful temptation must be."

"She conquered, and is at rest!" said Carlo, steadying his voice with an effort. "Father Cristoforo told me he never knew one so young who had so little clinging to life. It is as she would have wished."

For some time he was grave and silent; his mind was full of Nita's sad story.

"Does it not seem to you more than three years," he said at length, "since we last sat here together like this? To me it seems like a lifetime."

"And, oh, Carlo," said Francesca, clinging to him, "I don't know how it is—but, though so many sad things have come between, I can't help feeling happier even than long ago! I thought I couldn't be happier than I was when you first told me you loved me, here in this summer-house,—but now, Carlo! . . . now! . . ."

* * * * *

So, one day in the following week, Francesca put on the old white dress and her confirmation veil, and Kate twined orange-blossom and myrtle into a wreath, and Sibyl and Gigi gathered the prettiest white flowers they could find in the garden, and with infinite pains made them up into a very original bridal bouquet. Then everyone at Casa Bella drove in to Naples, where Carlo awaited them with Enrico Ritter at his side; and presently, with Piale, Marioni, old Florestano, and Sardonì and his wife, for spectators, the two lovers were quietly married.

"After all," said Captain Britton, when the bride and bridegroom had driven away, "though, I suppose, a voice like that must be used, yet I shall always think that Carlo deserved to be something better than a singer."

"My dear sir," exclaimed Piale, vehemently, "the life of a good singer is one perpetual course of self-denial! And, I assure you, we, too, have had our heroes. Must a whole profession be despised because some of

those engaged in it are not all they should be? When a man like Donati is sent to us, for Heaven's sake let us keep him, and say, as in duty bound, 'DEO GRATIAS!'"

THE END.

PRINTING OFFICE OF THE PUBLISHER.

